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# Innocence - A Question: Trauma and its Effects on Personality in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

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## Abstract

This paper aims to explore the deep-rooted impact of childhood trauma with reference to the novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) by Stephen Chbosky. It will navigate this topic through the experiences of various characters in the novel, beginning with the main character, Charlie, and the sexual abuse he faced as a child. Other characters that will be explored are Aunt Helen who displays an instance of the abuse victim becoming the abuser, and Brad, who has a physically abusive father. This novel not only displays the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) but also shows different examples of the same. Through this paper, I will examine how different people react differently to trauma and how it affects adolescent and adult relationships. Thus, the main focus will be on trauma theory, and its association with psychoanalysis, gender theory, and queer theory.

**Keywords:** Abuse, childhood, memory, PTSD, relationships, trauma

## 1. Introduction

> *"...and trauma had a way of burning memories deeper into the mind."*
> (Brown 417)

Rutter emphasises the importance of adult social experiences leading to social development in adult life and also points out that the timing of an experience is a

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dominant factor in influencing the impact it causes (25). It is a known fact that a person's childhood is one of the key factors in shaping their behaviour and their social relationships throughout adolescence and adulthood. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* several characters have faced physical and/or sexual abuse in their childhood. Therefore, the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) caused by this childhood trauma is an extremely researched theme within the context of this novel.

### 1.1 Defining trauma

As Valent mentions, trauma is derived from the ancient Greek word for wound (2). Browne and Winkelman chose to define childhood trauma, based on various definitions, as a psychological result caused by an external blow that renders the child temporarily helpless and breaks past ordinary coping mechanisms (684). They strongly hold that — based on previous research — sexual, verbal, and physical abuse, along with negligence fall under the scope of incidents that may cause childhood trauma. Heidarizadeh defines trauma as "the state of mind which results from an injury" (789). She goes as far as to connect trauma to psychoanalytic theory, a point which is further expanded by Sawai who explains psychoanalysis trauma as instances where trauma and the traumatic memory affect the mind of the characters and lead to long-term consequences (283).

### 1.2 Trauma and psychoanalysis

Valent, in a 2003 talk, linked trauma and psychoanalysis through their history to show how the two are connected even today. According to him, trauma is a "determinant of human thought and action" (1). On a similar note, trauma is something that "outstrips and disrupts the psyche's capacity for representation and mentalization" (Levine 219). Trauma, until mentalised, remains repetitive as a potential for action, somatisation, and projection, remaining locked and unremembered. However, as many like Sawai have stated, different people will react differently to similar traumas (283).

Through *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, I aim to strengthen this exact premise. With the use of trauma theory and psychoanalysis, the present actions can be justified on the basis of past experiences. These actions, as is made very evident in the book, differ for individuals, even if the experiences are similar. This book has characters who have faced similar traumas in the past and yet differ in their externalisation of trauma. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* also helps justify the belief that the personality, behaviour, and relationships of an adolescent are a result, or an externalisation, of their past traumas. This will help to exhibit that each character

has had a different response which still falls in line with the generally accepted symptoms of PTSD, or of trauma. Another important facet of this book is the impact that childhood trauma causes on adolescent relationships and friendships. Both these points will be explored by focusing on three important characters in the novel: Charlie, Aunt Helen, and Brad. The main focus, based on the fact that the novel is written by Charlie himself and readers know the most about him, will be on his character. The others can only be analysed based on the limited information provided by Charlie, which showcases only one side. Thus, while this paper will be analysing Charlie's trauma and his character from an outsider's perspective, it is important to remember that the other characters will be examined from Charlie's perspective, in a way.

### 1.3 Defining post-traumatic stress disorder

An important point to note, before beginning the analysis is the difference between trauma and PTSD that Goff et al. point out (451). They bring in Shalov, one of the people who has challenged the definition of trauma given in the DSM-IV-TR. They state that a stressful event "becomes traumatic… and it affects human bonds and networks". Trauma is based on an event (or multiple events), whereas PTSD is the aftermath caused by the trauma which affects the victim's behaviour. While I explored some definitions of trauma, a comprehensive definition of PTSD is given by Cathy Caruth, a pioneer in the field of literary trauma theory. She defines PTSD as something that "reflects the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, psychically and neurobiologically, by an event that it cannot control" (58). Austriani condenses the symptoms of PTSD given by the DSM-V into five critical points: "exposure to stressor, re-experiencing of traumatic event, avoidance, arousal, and duration" (where duration refers to the duration of the disturbance caused) (31). Another important point to remember for this paper is that I will solely be focusing on the effects of the trauma, and not on the coping mechanisms used by the characters to deal with it.

## 2. Charlie's Trauma

### 2.1 Memory and truth

Morrissey mentions, in his novel, the question of truth as the key to understanding PTSD. He also refers to the difference between narrative and traumatic memory, where a traumatic experience causes changes in the way memory is stored. This memory cannot be retrieved ordinarily. He explains the lack of control a victim has with regard to his traumatic memory. Thus, based on previous definitions of trauma, traumatic memories are much like the trauma itself: something that cannot be

controlled. As Morrissey explains it, all elements of a traumatic memory follow haphazardly when one is evoked. This, in itself, shows how Charlie suffers from PTSD. Towards the end of the novel, Charlie's experience with Sam triggers his memory to remember the only sexual touch he has ever experienced previously, i.e. the sexual harassment caused by Aunt Helen. The word "Trigger", here, is with reference to the APA's definition as a "stimulus that exhibits a reaction". Chbosky, in his writing, has beautifully portrayed the haphazardness of such traumatic memory by explaining the sexual abuse that Charlie faced in such a confusing way that a reader could almost miss it. When Charlie stops Sam from going beyond kissing, he states that "it felt good" and that he "didn't know what was wrong." (Chbosky 202). Similarly, if Charlie was not able to logicalise his memories, he may never have remembered the experience himself. Charlie remembered what had happened in the form of a dream.

Victims of PTSD are known to commonly not remember partial or whole details of the events that occurred, while still suffering from the trauma caused by that memory. In this case, Morrissey talks about verbally accessible memory (VAM) and situationally accessible memory (SAM), where the description of SAM matches that of traumatic memory. SAM comes in the form of involuntary flashbacks due to situations that remind the victim of the trauma. This is exactly what happens between Charlie and Sam, except that Charlie's flashbacks are through a dream. He describes it as a slow-motion dream where he was with his aunt Helen and "she was doing what Sam was doing" (Chbosky 204). The situational trigger activates a part of his memory that had been repressed as it did not "fit within the paradigm of previous experiences" (Morrissey). He soon realises that the dream is, in fact, a memory. This is when the reader also begins to realise what had happened. Charlie, due to his inability to form relationships, feels like he has no one, and continues to state that even if his Aunt Helen were here, he could not talk to her. He states that he is "starting to feel like what I dreamt about her last night was true" (205).

## 2.2 Freudian theory

Before Charlie discovered the truth (as Morrissey states, "setting aside the subjectivity of the nature of truth"), the Freudian concept of dissociation, as well as that of repression was visible in his character, the difference between them being that a dissociated memory is the replacement of a memory with another one that is not as traumatic, whereas repressing of a memory is its removal from the conscious entirely. In Charlie's case, the actual memory of the sexual abuse is repressed, to the extent

that he goes into a trance when he recalls it. APA defines a "Trance" as "an altered state of consciousness characterized by decreased awareness of and responsiveness to stimuli and an apparent loss of voluntary power." This falls in line with Charlie's description of what happened in the epilogue where he states that he was found completely naked, watching a television that was off and would not "snap out of it". Interestingly, according to his memory or "dream", Aunt Helen also touched him inappropriately when they were sitting and watching television.

Charlie's memory, then, falls in line with Garland's statement about trauma survivors' memories, stating that people who have not gone through a gravely traumatising incident "can recollect the events of the day without that experience being so vivid that it is equivalent to reliving those events. Reliving… indicates that the distinction between I and the *event* has been lost… remembering has been replaced by re-experiencing" (173). Charlie relives a lot of the moments that he "recollects" throughout the novel, most of those being memories of Aunt Helen, and the reader can see Charlie's trauma just as vividly as Charlie remembers those events. This is the trauma of a child who has lost the person closest to him, as well as the trauma of a victim of sexual abuse who has just come to realise what they had experienced.

Dissociation of Charlie's memory occurs when, multiple times, he goes through depressive episodes, especially when his birthday is around the corner. He believes his lows are caused due to Aunt Helen's death and blames himself for it, not realising that there is another memory underneath that causes him distress.

This is not to say that Aunt Helen's death did not cause trauma to Charlie. She was, ultimately, his favourite person; however, her death is only a part of the entire traumatic experience that Charlie faced in his childhood. Charlie essentially replaced one traumatic event with another less traumatic event to maintain the image that he had of Aunt Helen as the only one who gave him affection in the family. Aunt Helen's death caused him PTSD in the form of constant re-experience of the trauma, whereas her abuse caused him trauma in the form of defence mechanisms like repression and dissociation.

Here, I bring in Utami's research. Utami cites previous studies on Charlie's personality to point out his fixation as another defence mechanism apart from dissociation and repression (7). Fixation, in layman's language, is when a trauma causes the victim to be stuck in the stage of development when the trauma occurred. This, with Charlie, occurred in his latency stage, when he was seven. While Utami's

paper is about the movie, and not the novel, I believe this fixation is more visible in the novel. Charlie refers to this as him "getting bad" or "looking bad again", something that is mentioned multiple times in the novel. Looking at it more technically, fixation, according to Freud, was when a "patient gives us the impression of being *fixated* upon some very definite part of their past… estranged both from the present and the future" (240). According to Freud, the victim continues to deal with the trauma of the past through their fixation. In Charlie's letter dated December 30, 1991, the last few paragraphs describe this aptly. He states that he "read the book again that night because I knew that if I didn't, I would probably start crying again" (Chbosky 93). This cry, however, according to Charlie, is a panicky type of crying that is brought back by memories of the past. Based on the description of his thoughts, these memories seem to force their way into his mind, allowing him no escape. While the recollection of the past is an instance of fixation, Charlie's reading is a means of avoidance and repression which is recurrently seen in the novel. Utami's paper also mentions that Charlie's fixation is the reason he has a problem forming social connections (7). Paying more close attention to this point, it is evident in the novel that Charlie has had very few friends throughout his school life. He mentions Susan and Michael from when he was in middle school, showing us that he already had trouble forming intimate friendships. After this, Michael Dobson, in the crude manner that Charlie states it, "killed himself" (Chbosky 3).

Childhood trauma has a distinct effect on the attachment system of a child, which leads to a disruption in their development as they focus more on the concern of their security rather than that of learning or developing interpersonal relationships (Yumbul et al. 1,742). In Charlie's case, I believe that the reason he was a "wallflower", as described in the book, was because of this disruption, not once, but twice, of a person close to him dying. As Bill, his English professor, mentions, "sometimes people use thought to not participate in life" (Chbosky 24). The dialogues following that part show how unaware Charlie is of this defence, smoothly providing justifications for his lack of "participation".

### 2.3 Charlie's model of self, of others, and affect regulation

As previously mentioned, trauma caused during a person's childhood has lasting effects and impacts the child's development of relationships. The word relationships is not being used in a romantic sense but refers to any social relationships a person may have.

Browne and Winkelman state that childhood abuse and neglect lead to a negative model-of-self as well as negative models-of-others (686). Apart from this, it also leads to problems with the regulating affect of a person. As Taipale describes it, affect regulation is simply how people regulate the intensity, duration, and occurrence of their moods, emotions, and internal state (1). He describes the standard picture of affect regulation as the "regulation of the self by the self" (2).

The first point, which is the model-of-self, is something that is given a lot of importance in the novel. An important, and very famous, line from the novel stated by Bill, talks about this. He states that "we accept the love we think we deserve" (Chbosky 24). This line puts into perspective how many people, not only in the novel but also in the real world, settle for less than what they deserve because they have a negative model of self. Model of self, in this case, refers to Morse et al.'s definition, which declares that the "model of self describes whether people view themselves as worthy of care" (211). While even others in the novel have a negative sense of self, some of these will be explored later in the paper, as the focus of this section is Charlie.

Charlie very evidently suffers from low self-esteem. Since the beginning of the novel, he shows how he thinks he is different from others (in a negative sense). He is very conscious about his actions around people, with no fault of his own. It almost seems as if his trauma has caused him to be disconnected from the rest of the world until he meets Patrick and Sam, who accept him with open arms. In his entry dated October 28, 1991, towards the end when he starts crying, he mentions that "nobody in the room looked at me weird for doing it", suggesting that this was the reaction he often received when he cried (Chbosky 38). Another example of this is in a previous entry, dated September 7, 1991, where Charlie states that some people from his school "look at me strange in the hallways" (8). In fact, in the first entry itself, Charlie's low self-esteem is evident from the last sentence, where he gives the anonymous friend his reason for writing to them, saying that he is "really afraid" of starting high school the next day (6). While this sentence seems innocent and normal at first, one only realises how it signifies Charlie's negative model of self as one gets to know him better later on.

Charlie's model of others is also negatively affected by his trauma. Model of others, according to Morse et al., is a person's idea of whether others can be trusted to provide care. Charlie does not get close to anyone until he meets Sam and Patrick. He does not feel like he can trust anyone else. This is one of the reasons he does not

communicate with people. The one person that he communicates with transparently and trusts throughout the novel is the anonymous friend to whom he is addressing his letters. However, he trusts this friend only because they are anonymous and he specifically asks them not to try and figure out who he is. His trust comes from the fact that he overheard a girl in his class. With all the sexual abuse that Charlie has experienced and heard of his loved ones experience, he finds this person very trustworthy because he knows that this person does not do that. He states that "...she said you listen and understand and didn't try to sleep with that person at that party even though you could have" as the reason he is writing to this person (2). It is important to note that Sam does not distrust these people. He simply does not trust them to provide care to him. This is evident even in his last entry. He states "Sam's gone. And Patrick won't be home for a few days. And I just couldn't talk with Mary Elizabeth or anybody or my brother or anybody in my family. Except maybe my aunt Helen. But she's gone" (205). Here, Charlie's aforementioned fixation on the past is seen, along with how he has never trusted anyone to take care of him except Sam and Patrick.

Finally, there is a need to address the problems with his affect regulation. Charlie is a very emotional person. He involuntarily breaks into tears at seemingly insignificant things. For instance, when he has a sexual dream about Sam and tells Sam about it, he says that he started crying because he felt bad, while Sam simply laughs about it. Even when he beat up his bully, Sean, he had to be driven home because he could not stop crying. Charlie has very little control over his emotions, and we cannot be sure whether this is caused by his trauma or not. Seemingly, though, while he is a pretty emotional person, his trauma has aggravated this and caused him to become erratic when it comes to emotions. Even when he finds out about his friend Michael's suicide in middle school, he starts screaming and crying uncontrollably, unlike the other kids, showing us that he has been this way since before the trauma of Michael's death. Muralidhar interprets this lack of control over emotions in a more Freudian way and refers to it as the dominance of Charlie's id caused by the childhood trauma of his aunt's death and even uses this to justify other trauma effects such as the difficulty in developing interpersonal relationships, his low self-esteem and his confused sense of self. However, it seems that these problems, while linked to his trauma, have multiple causes and cannot simply be restricted to the dominance of his id, which does not seem plausible considering how much he was affected by his conscience, which falls under the superego.

Another part of Charlie's behaviour that addresses the issues in his affect regulation is his inability to communicate his wishes and feelings in general as well, not just his feelings regarding his traumatic experiences (Cook et al. 392). For instance, when Mary Elizabeth asks him out, he says yes despite not liking her, and despite already having feelings for Sam (Chbosky 112). He lets her constantly talk about herself, even though he is tired of it because he does not want to upset her. In his entry dated March 7, 1992, Charlie and Mary Elizabeth kiss and make out and, while this is not explicitly mentioned, Charlie does not seem to be a willing participant in it (126-127). In the next entry, when he talks about his invitation to Sam and Patrick for dinner at his place, he does not tell Mary Elizabeth that she is not invited when she automatically assumes that she is. He does not express his anger over the fact that she stole the attention of his parents for the entire dinner, the purpose of which was his parents meeting Sam and Patrick. He only writes about how "they never got to meet Sam and Patrick" (130). He writes that he wishes "Mary Elizabeth would ask me questions other than 'What's up?'", but never bothers to communicate this to her (131). In the following entry, he explains how he **"**made a terrible mess of things" (132). Most of this is because of his inability to communicate several things, from minor ones such as the fact that he did not like the book she gave him or that he did not want to talk to her on the phone after school to major ones such as kissing Sam in truth or dare when he was dared to "kiss the prettiest girl in the room" when he could have simply told Mary Elizabeth about his lack of feelings any time while they were dating, if not before (135). He explains that if he hadn't kissed Sam in the dare, he would be "lying to everyone…And I just couldn't do it anymore" (135). His frustration, thus, built up and spilled over into an eruption which almost led him to lose his friendship with everyone.

However, even further in the novel, he does not learn how to share how he feels. Later on in the novel, after Patrick is beaten up by Brad, he decides to go to a gay park, accompanied by Charlie. This happens for a few nights in a row and when he drops Charlie back home, they kiss. Moving to almost the end of the novel, when Sam is preparing to leave, in his entry dated June 2, 1992, Charlie describes a conversation that he had with Sam, where Sam addresses the entire problem about Charlie not wanting to upset anyone, always trying to be a good friend and keeping things to himself. Sam explains to him how his behaviour makes her feel, saying "Charlie, don't you get it? I can't feel that. It's sweet and everything, but it's like you're not even there sometimes…You can't just sit there and put everybody's lives ahead of yours and think that counts as love" (200). After this, Sam questions his

actions and attempts to make Charlie communicate with her. She questions why he let Patrick kiss him when he didn't want him to and he states that he was "trying to be a friend" (201). I believe that Charlie's inability to communicate mainly rises from his fear of abandonment caused by the death of Michael and Aunt Helen. He tries to appease everyone in his life because he is scared of them leaving.

### 2.4 Sublimation

Octaviani and Saraswati refer to Charlie's act of writing letters as an act of sublimation (17). Barry refers to sublimation as a process in which "repressed material is 'promoted' into something grander or is disguised as something 'noble'" (70). The act of writing these letters calms Charlie down. He reveals all the secrets that he kept as a wallflower as he has the safety net of anonymity to fall back on. The activity of writing the letters makes Charlie feel better. Even Matos makes note of writing being displayed as a "therapeutic tool" in this particular novel. In the entry of January 4, 1992, he mentions his desperacy to post the letter that he had written the previous night. "I dropped the letter into the mailbox. And it felt final. And calm" states Charlie (Chbosky 98). Octaviani and Saraswati also refer to Charlie's act of making mixtapes, as well as reading, as sublimation (18). Nurmalasari, on the other hand, refers to these actions as his internal coping mechanisms (8-9).

Charlie, through mixtapes and letters, has found a way to express himself in a way that is healthier and more acceptable. I would like to argue that all of these acts are not instances of sublimation. These, I believe, are means of escape, as suggested by Nurmalasari. Charlie reads in order to repress thoughts that make him feel "bad again", as previously mentioned in this paper. The mixtapes do not seem to have much correlation with his trauma. Perhaps they are simply a hobby that he would have had even without his trauma. He makes mixtapes to mark special occasions such as the first time he gets to drive, and even to gift them to his friends. Perhaps it's simply his way of storing memories. Finally, the act of writing the letters is also, according to me, not an act of sublimation. There is nothing noble or grand about these letters. He is simply talking about his life to someone he believes he can trust. He tells his friend everything, including the repressed information that he later learns about. Charlie uses letters as a coping mechanism for his anxiety and as a substitute for a friend that he does not have.

Charlie is undeniably a character who has suffered a lot for his age, but there are others in the novel who have trauma from their past experiences too, as previously mentioned. They display their trauma in ways different from Charlie's and it is important not to ignore their experiences.

## 3. Aunt Helen's Trauma

Charlie describes Aunt Helen's childhood in his entry dated December 26, 1991. He says that Aunt Helen was molested in her childhood by a close family friend and when she mustered up the courage to tell her father about this, "he didn't believe her because of who it was… My grandma never said anything either. And the man kept coming over for visits" (Chbosky 90).

He goes on to explain that she was, at one point in her life, an alcoholic and a drug abuser, no doubt at least partly a result of her childhood experiences. He states that "she was a very unhappy person most of her life" (90). At the same time, he even talks about the "bad men" in her life, suggesting that she entered into toxic relationships with people who abused her. Apart from all this trauma, and its impact on her, there is something else Charlie mentions in his entry of September 29, 1991, that a reader might almost not see as a trial for her compared to what she has already been through. Charlie says that his mom "was always the pretty one", whereas Aunt Helen was "always the other one" (16). To ignore this would be to undermine the impact such a situation would have on the self-esteem of a person who already had to go through the trauma of molestation as a child. As I will go on to explain, I do not think it would be far-fetched to suggest that Aunt Helen's toxic relationships, and even her abuse of Charlie, are at least partly a result of her being the "other one" among the two siblings and its effects on her self-esteem.

According to Rowan et al., an increase in sex hormone levels and hyposexuality may be caused due to CSA, in which case they are more likely to be victimised in the future (36). However, the opposite may also happen, where sex becomes a negative experience and makes the victim re-experience painful thoughts. The first appears to happen in the case of Aunt Helen, while the second appears to happen in Charlie's case. Due to this, Aunt Helen is not only victimised but also continues the cycle of abuse that is often referred to when it comes to a victim of CSA. Rowan et al. state that this cycle is not, however, a universal phenomenon (15). They also point out the difference in the dynamic when a woman molests a child, as compared to when a man does the same, in that women are rarely ever recorded as perpetrators of CSA. They go on to state that "abusing women rarely report a person history of abuse" (15). Glasser et al.'s study corroborates this view, with their research showing that only "2% of female victims became offenders" (489). While they point out the common belief of the victim to victimiser cycle when it comes to CSA, they attempt to disprove it. According to their study, 35% of the male perpetrators were victims of CSA. This difference in gender could be due to various reasons such as their

study majorly consisting of males, or the reason that they suggested in their paper itself, i.e. male victims externalise their reactions and female victims internalise them. However, both Glasser et al. and Rowan et al. suggest the same thing: female victims are less likely to be perpetrators of CSA than male victims (Glasser et al. 489; Rowan et al. 15). Aunt Helen, thus, seems to be a deviation from this norm.

An important question that arises based on Aunt Helen's life is whether there is a relationship between child sexual abuse (CSA) and alcoholism. Rowan et al. state that the confusion caused by the abuse as well as the negative feelings that result from it "may make the survivor more susceptible to self-medication with drugs or alcohol" (37), both of which Aunt Helen used to abuse. They also suggest that this negativity may lead to physical health issues, as it did with her. Charlie backs this point by mentioning that Aunt Helen "went to hospitals all the time", where hospitals refer to mental health hospitals as well as physical health hospitals (Chbosky 90).

Another result of Aunt Helen's trauma, as previously mentioned, is the kind of men she chooses to date. Rowan et al. say "Self-identification as a 'victim' or 'damaged goods' may result in low self-esteem and create a pattern of self-destructive behavior" (37). The fact that her parents did nothing to help her would also have affected her self-esteem and self-worth negatively. While already feeling alienated because of this, her feelings were furthered by the fact that she was the "other" sibling. DiLillo et al. conducted a study among low-income women and noted that women who reported CSA were more likely to be involved in physically abusive relationships. Several studies validate this view such as Daigneault et al.'s research, whose results suggest that people who experienced CSA were at greater risk of experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV), especially when the CSA victim was a woman.

As a final point regarding Aunt Helen, I would like to point out the possibility that Charlie's mother being the more liked sibling was one of the causes of Charlie's sexual abuse. While Aunt Helen was taking her sister's help to navigate her life, she was also the one who faced molestation as a child, in a way "protecting" her sister from facing it instead. What she received in return was alienation and trauma. Perhaps, consciously or subconsciously, she sexually abused Charlie due to a will for revenge, or to return the trauma that she received and protected her sister from.

## 4. Brad's Trauma

Brad is a classic jock high-schooler: popular, attends parties, hypermasculine. However, it turns out that he is gay. Casselman and Rosenbaum attempt to establish

a link between traditional masculine ideologies of the father and aggression of the son, where they define traditional masculine ideologies as "a rigid set of beliefs about manhood that includes antifemininity, avoidance of emotions, and an overemphasis on achievement and competition" (515). They also link perceived father rejection and feelings of shame.

Brad has a strict father and he tries to live up to the expectations that have been set for him. However, he also has feelings for Patrick, which confuses him and makes him feel shame. His father is a homophobic man and has passed on these feelings to his son. As Ong et al. suggest, "internalised homophobia is determined by the social climate" (2). Brad's internalised homophobia is so severe that he turns to alcoholism and drug abuse as a coping mechanism. At first, this happens only when he and Patrick are together. He pretends to be more drunk or more stoned than he is in order to allow himself to do anything sexual with Patrick. He even puts up the front of having a girlfriend, Nancy, who he brings to prom, due to his inability to accept his sexuality. After every party, for seven months straight, he covers up his homosexual activities with Brad by saying, "Man, I was so wasted. I don't remember a thing" (Chbosky 44). The concept of sexual repression also comes into play here as Brad is hiding his sexuality.

However, he genuinely does have feelings for Patrick, and in actuality, he remembers what happened at the parties. Brad faces difficulty accepting himself and finds out that being drunk or stoned allows him to escape from the reality that is setting in on him even without the parties. As Charlie writes, "It got to a point where Brad was getting stoned or drunk before school" (44). When Patrick and Brad had sex for the first time, Charlie states that "Brad assumed the role of the girl" (44). As someone who had already been going through psychological problems and stress due to being unable to come to terms with his "unmasculine" behaviour of being attracted to males. This pushed him over the edge and he started crying and later had to be taken home by his parents, either asleep or pretending to be asleep.

Finally, Brad's parents sent him to rehabilitation for the remaining summer because of his addictive behaviour. Brad's father did this because he "didn't want him to miss his chance at a football scholarship" (45). If Charlie knows this as the reason, we can assume that Brad does too. This, I believe, counts as perceived father rejection. His father does not care about what Brad does or how he is, simply about how he performs and how he displays himself to the larger society. Brad, for his father, is simply a status symbol to show off to others.

Despite all this, Brad's internalised homophobia reduces as he is now able to be with Patrick while sober. Things only go downhill for Brad and Patrick after this, when they get caught by Brad's father and Brad is beaten black and blue. While Patrick tries to stop him, Brad tells him to get out of there and Patrick has no choice but to listen.

At this point, Casselman and Rosenbaum's aforementioned point about aggression caused in sons due to the father's behaviour is important to note. When Brad sees Patrick in school upon his return, he called Patrick a "f*gg*t" (Chbosky 150). According to Taywaditep, this is one of the slurs that has been reserved for effeminate gay men, who are despised by masculine men who identify as homosexual (7). The same article also looks into the anti-effeminacy attitudes that gay men who are defeminised hold, suggesting that defeminised gay men face prejudice, violence, and bullying at the hands of other gay men for being "stereotypically" gay (Taywaditep 22). This often stems due to their own insecurities about their masculinity. This explains Brad beating up Patrick that day in school. Another possible explanation for that is the fact that Brad had an image to maintain in front of his peers who were not aware of his relationship with Patrick and did not expect him to interact with someone who falls so low in the social hierarchy of the school. The latter seems like a more plausible explanation as, in detention with Charlie, Brad thanks him for stopping his friends from hurting Patrick more than they already had. He even tells Sam to "tell him I'm sorry" (Chbosky 152).

On the entry of May 17, 1992, Charlie writes that Patrick spotted Brad with another person at the gay park that they had gone to. Perhaps, despite all that Brad has been taught, and all that Brad had to face from his hypermasculine, abusive father, he does learn to accept himself as he is, unlearning and relearning the "truths" and rights and wrongs of life.

## 5. Conclusion

The novel *Perks of Being a Wallflower* leaves us with a lot of questions about our life, about the characters' lives, about society in general, and about how individual lives affect others' lives and society as a whole. It gives us an entirely different perspective on coming-of-age. While many coming-of-age novels focus on the problems of the present, this is a novel that focuses on how the problems of the past affect adolescents in the present. Chbosky's brilliant writing has combined the past, present, and future in such a way that the reader becomes aware of the

meaninglessness of time. It teaches us one important lesson: it is not time that heals us. People heal themselves. Claussen calls reading this novel a cathartic experience. The reader connects with the character of Charlie deeply. Is there any adolescent who has not felt left out and alone at some point? Readers laugh with him, cry with him, and face his confusion and his horror as the novel progresses. They feel pity for him and fear for his well-being and the well-being of his loved ones, and finally, as everything is resolved, the individual undergoes what can only be referred to as a "purification" of our emotions, as Aristotle called it.

## APPENDIX

### Michael's Suicide Note

Once on a yellow piece of paper with green lines
he wrote a poem
And he called it "Chops"
because that was the name of his dog
And that's what it was all about
And his teacher gave him an A
and a gold star
And his mother hung it on the kitchen door
and read it to his aunts
That was the year Father Tracy
took all the kids to the zoo
And he let them sing on the bus
And his little sister was born
with tiny toenails and no hair
And his mother and father kissed a lot
And the girl around the corner sent him a
Valentine signed with a row of X's
and he had to ask his father what the X's meant
And his father always tucked him in bed at night
And was always there to do it

Once on a piece of white paper with blue lines
he wrote a poem
And he called it "Autumn"
because that was the name of the season
And that's what it was all about
And his teacher gave him an A
and asked him to write more clearly
And his mother never hung it on the kitchen door
because of its new paint
And the kids told him
that Father Tracy smoked cigars
And left butts on the pews

And sometimes they would burn holes
That was the year his sister got glasses
with thick lenses and black frames
And the girl around the corner laughed
when he asked her to go see Santa Claus
And the kids told him why
his mother and father kissed a lot
And his father never tucked him in bed at night
And his father got mad
when he cried for him to do it.

Once on a paper torn from his notebook
he wrote a poem
And he called it "Innocence: A Question"
because that was the question about his girl
And that's what it was all about
And his professor gave him an A
and a strange steady look
And his mother never hung it on the kitchen door
because he never showed her
That was the year that Father Tracy died
And he forgot how the end
of the Apostle's Creed went
And he caught his sister
making out on the back porch
And his mother and father never kissed
or even talked
And the girl around the corner
wore too much makeup
That made him cough when he kissed her
but he kissed her anyway
because that was the thing to do
And at three a.m. he tucked himself into bed
his father snoring soundly

That's why on the back of a brown paper bag
he tried another poem
And he called it "Absolutely Nothing"
Because that's what it was really all about
And he gave himself an A
and a slash on each damned wrist
And he hung it on the bathroom door
because this time he didn't think
he could reach the kitchen.

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