



# Analysing Adolescence and the Youth Lens in Stephen Chbosky's The Perks of Being a Wallflower

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## Abstract

Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* easily qualifies as a bildungsroman as it incorporates many essential traits of a bildungsroman. For instance, these stories showcase the gradual development and metamorphosis of the pivotal character's mind from an immature to a more mature person. This essay is a humble effort to relate the 'coming of age' experience of Charlie, the introverted adolescent protagonist.

**Keywords:** Adolescent, Bildungsroman, Stephen Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Character, Maturity, Metamorphosis, Abuse

Addressing an entire spectrum of adolescent life, Young Adult Fiction may be categorized as a rather new entrant in the arena of English literature. In this genre, the world of young people is convincingly projected and the point of confluence remains a potpourri of emotions essential to their universe. Young Adult books present protagonists who are capable of displaying remarkable achievements despite being confronted with hazards and challenges. What is remarkable is the astonishing moral growth of the characters. In the novel, the dramatis personae on the stage of life are quite akin to E.M. Forster's "round" characters, developing and changing considerably through the novel.

Intrinsically, "Young Adult Literature" appears to be ushering in a change. Like culture and society, the terms constituting the word, "young adult" and "literature" are also changeable. To start with, young adult literature implied adherence to naturalistic and pragmatic fiction which was concerned with contemporary issues. It concentrated on interrogations, hardships, experiences, happenings, and circumstances touching the young readers aged between twelve and eighteen. The adolescent novels of that time also entitled, "junior novels" were didactic in nature, dealing with issues that were usually shielded in content for young adults. The 1970s witnessed a dynamic change in the subject matter of young adult literature. The instructive and preachy attributes were soon replaced with creative transformation, artistic innovation, investigation, and adventurousness. No longer were young adult novels written as adolescent guidebooks for good behavior; these books dealt with serious issues and addressed taboo concepts otherwise unheard of in previous literature for teens.<sup>1</sup>

The year 1967, saw the emergence of two benchmark publications aimed at young adult readers, namely, S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* and Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender*. Before these two novels, the novels regarding young adults featured adolescents whose chief enthusiasm and interest were about deciding a day for the senior prom or creating the dreamy world of the first flush of romance. Popularly known as "junior novels", these books highlighted tales about frivolous relationships, adventure stories, and a peek-a-boo into the universe of science and technology, racy cars, and ideas about career formation.

In this paper, we are going to examine the young adult novels of Stephen Chbosky as a bildungsroman. Examining the tenets of the Bildungsroman genre, Feroza Jussawalla aptly comments: "The Bildungsroman originally a German, nationalist genre, as used by postcolonial novelists to show the growth of a young protagonist into nationalist, anti-colonial sentiments is the form that helps define the true characteristics of what constitutes Post coloniality in a work of literature. The most important component, however, is that the growth defined is not just anti-colonial but is towards indigenously in language, style, religious roots and belonging".<sup>2</sup>

The foremost expression for a coming-of-age story is 'bildungsroman'. Bildungsroman was minted in 17th century Germany, when Johann Wolfgang Goethe and his contemporaries began penning sagas about young protagonists, commencing a stormy journey towards maturity. It has been derived from the German words Bildung which means "formation" and Roman which means "novel". The genre surfaced from folklore tales of the youngest child daring to venture into the outside universe in pursuit of a luminous future. The bildungsroman is mostly perceived as a novel that marks the growth of an individual from youth into maturity, a growth encompassing character development culminating in accommodation between the individual and society. Ultimately, such an accommodation results in the mature individual finding a place in his or her world. Envisaging the mental and moral progress of the protagonist from youth to adulthood, the young adult novels depict the protagonist accomplishing an important lesson and projecting social, spiritual, or mental expansion. In these novels, we see that the physical and mental advancement of the character is of great value. While the problematic issues associated with the question of survival, anxiety, angst, and hardships may generate conundrum and puzzlement in a young adult's mind, they conclude by educating them about their self-identity.

English fiction has been replete with many stories which can be termed as a Bildungsroman. The much-acclaimed novels of Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, and *Great Expectations*, for instance, may well qualify as a bildungsroman. *David Copperfield* tells us about David's embarking upon a journey in which he faces many hurdles and adversities, which finally shape his character and personality. to maturity. The Bildungsroman of David, the hero, culminates in his quest for his identity and his evolution into a full man. Thus, we can examine David from his birth till he reaches a balance between himself and society, though only after he has learned some difficult truths about life and has been metamorphosed consequently. James Joyce's acclaimed novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* also delineates the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood. The novel fulfills the requirement of a coming-of-age story beginning with the teenager Stephen Dedalus' sojourn at a boarding school. Unable to bear the onus of his sins and wrongdoings, he decides to metamorphose himself. Further, in the search for redemption, he goes for confession in the church. He started working as a cleric for some time. However, dissatisfied with life as a cleric, Stephen proceeds on the creative journey as an artist.

The well-known bildungsroman novel, Henry Fielding's, *Tom Jones*, is about the orphan brought up by the clement Squire Allworthy. The orphan adores the beautiful Sophie Western but is unable to marry her due to the variance in their stations and also because his father is against this relationship as he says that Tom is a bastard. When the wicked Blifil deludes the squire into pushing Tom out of his home, the young man enters into the world on a succession of lively and zealous escapades full of sword fights, mistaken identities, acts of kindness, and robust women. Finally, when it is known to all that Tom is not a bastard, he is finally accepted by all, as it is disclosed that he is the son of Allworthy's friend, Mr. Summer, and Allworthy's sister. Mrs. Waters. Thus, we can trace the growth of Tom through undertaking myriad adventures while traveling and looking for his paramour.

The *Prelude* by Wordsworth with its subtitle, "Growth of A Poet's Mind," is another befitting example of a bildungsroman. It truthfully follows the development of a poet from childhood to maturity. Here, the poet himself relates how he started his early days of life communing with nature; how, in his youth, his purity and trust in human nature underwent many trials and tribunals; and how, after the extended gloominess, he emerged as a mature person in the end.

Last but not least, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* can be seen as a perfect example of a bildungsroman. The heroine Jane's life begins with a torturous childhood and the loss of her closest friend to a placement in a home where she gets no noble treatment. She encounters both love and deprivation. It is these experiences that change her into a mature woman who quite readily makes all sacrifices for her beliefs.

I choose to trace the novel, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, as a bildungsroman, in this paper. Stephen Chbosky's, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, is widely acknowledged as one of the most convincing representations of teenage life in contemporary literature. Ever since its publication in the year 1999, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* has elicited diverse critical opinions in literary and academic circles. It is considered an influential text for young readers across the country due to its honest picture of contemporary American teenage life. However, it has also garnered much criticism because of its explicit depiction of controversial themes and issues such as depression, sexual abuse, drug use, and homosexuality, to name a few. However, despite all the mixed responses from readers, the world over, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, remains a classic example of young adult fiction. Sammons very revealingly remarks: "I think that the Bildungsroman should have something to do with Bildung, that is, with the early bourgeois, humanistic concept of the shaping of the individual self from its innate potentialities through acculturation and social experience to the threshold of maturity. [ . . . ] A novel designated as a Bildungsroman should, it seems to me, be in some degree in contact with this concept. It does not much matter whether the process of Bildung succeeds or fails, whether the protagonist achieves accommodation with life and society or not."<sup>3</sup>

*The Perks of Being a Wallflower* easily qualifies as a bildungsroman as it incorporates many essential traits of a bildungsroman. For instance, these stories showcase the gradual development and metamorphosis of the pivotal character's mind from an immature to a more mature person. The chief protagonist is most significant to the plot and structure of the story. Although *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* belongs to the group of epistolary novels as far as its structure is concerned. Its matter and execution adhere to the group of developmental novels that trace the gradual development of the central character. In this type of novel, the protagonist unveils his mental state through his writing.

As in this context, the entire novel is penned in the form of letters, it becomes important to examine how the technique of writing and the technique of Bildung combine nicely to create the developmental novel.

At the beginning of his school phase, Charlie is cocooned in himself. He does not go out of his way to meet people. He was wallowing in great grief as he had to bear two deaths. This leaves Charlie feeling solitary, dejected, and sad. Charlie has no one to pin his faith on. However, after some time, with Sam and Patrick including him in their group, Charlie experiences what is the bond of friendship. The three friends clearly show through their participation in The Rocky Horror Picture Show the significance of friendship and sharing. They feel strong with a sense of belonging and a sense of freedom. It is interesting to see how Charlie's letters mirror his development as an individual; even the writing in his initial letters is more jumbled, disarrayed, and unripe in comparison to the latter letters. To explain this, I would like to quote an example of his letters written at the beginning: "Aunt Helen told my father not to hit me in front of her ever again and my father said this was his house and he would do what he wanted and my mom was quiet and so were my brother and sister."<sup>4</sup>

We visualize a gradual transformation in Charlie's writing style. It moves from immaturity to maturity. As Charlie keeps on becoming more experienced, so does his writing. With experience, Charlie starts comprehending himself and the people surrounding him better. It is important to note that Charlie looks forward to getting more and more counseling from his English teacher, Bill. Bill keeps improving Charlie educationally and personality-wise also. Charlie pays much heed to Bill's counseling very earnestly, and even though Bill grants Charlie an A grade on his report card, he gives lower marks for his essays. As Charlie remarks, "First of all, Bill gave me a C on my To Kill a Mockingbird essay because he said that I run my sentences together. I am trying now to practice not doing that. He also said that I should use the vocabulary words that I learned in class like "corpulent" and "jaundice." I would use them here, but I don't think they are appropriate in this format."<sup>5</sup>

Charlie's development from an unresisting and yielding member to an agile and dynamic member does not occur instantly, but gradually. Despite all his small and big endeavors, Charlie happens to figure as a wallflower in the ending letters of the novel. However, in the final letter, Samantha challenges Charlie and compels him to bear the outcome of his quiescence and inaction. Sam has split up with her boyfriend due to his infidelity, yet Charlie never goes forward to go out on a date with her as now she is in a detached state. The exasperated and vexed Sam challenges Charlie with the reality after he admits that he did not take action as he was more worried about her sorrowful state than attempting to stay with her: "It's great that you can listen and be a shoulder to someone, but what about when someone doesn't need a shoulder. What if they need the arms or something like that? You can't just sit there and put everybody's lives ahead of yours and think that counts as love. You just can't. You have to do things."<sup>6</sup>

In reply to the blame hurled at Charlie by Sam, Charlie goes to Sam and initiates a romantic moment by kissing her. It leads to an intimate physical interaction between Sam and Charlie. But this moment doesn't see its culmination as Charlie has to face a nervous breakdown. Charlie's mental state is traumatized due to the occurrence of an event that happened to him during his childhood. Behind all the problems that he encountered in his life, lay a very traumatic episode in his life. As a child, he had been sexually assaulted by his Aunt who is not there anymore. As this nervous breakdown shatters him, he is hospitalized for a few months. After this, realization dawns on Charlie and he decides to alter the course of his life.

This incident reminds us that the most important feature of the Bildungsroman is when the protagonist of the novel experiences a moment of insight in which “the reality of things breaks through the fog of delusion. And [the protagonist] feels a responsibility for change of heart and conduct.”<sup>7</sup> Definitely, the most astonishing and unmatched instant in which Charlie invigorates his subdued bygone days is distressing and arduous to bear mentally, but it is the instant in which Charlie starts to feel liberated from the intolerable onus of attempting to find out why he made that way. He also starts to wonder why was he so keen and interested to know about the world around him. At this juncture, it is very important to note that even though Charlie manages to streamline his life through his timely realization, and efforts, it is mainly through his writings, that he can present his viewpoint most comprehensively. In this context, I am reminded of Graham Greene, who remarked, “Writing is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose, or paint can manage to escape the madness, melancholia, the panic, and fear which is inherent in a human situation.”<sup>8</sup>

Charlie, the protagonist is a 15-year adolescent who happens to stay maximum in the company of books. Here, the main protagonist assumes the role of a narrator too. A bookworm to the core, Charlie spends his leisure hours only in the company of books. It is through his epistles that we get to know everything about him. All his life experiences, his valuable friends, and his difficult issues at home are explicit in his letters. A perceptible metamorphosis is visible in Charlie after meeting Sam and Patrick. The company of Sam has a very positive effect on Charlie. He becomes more extroverted than before. His confidence level also increases and Sam further often includes Charlie in her usual get-together with her friends. It was for the first time that Charlie started to hang out with friends.

As Charlie himself confesses, “Sam told me during the game that they were going over to their friend’s house later for a party. Then, she asked me if I wanted to go, and I said yes because I had never been to a party before.”<sup>9</sup> From a completely antisocial person, Charlie turns into a very mixed nature person. As he remarks, “Tomorrow, I start my sophomore year of high school. And believe it or not, I’m really not that afraid of going. I’m not sure if I will have the time to write any more letters because I might be too busy trying to ‘participate.’”<sup>10</sup>

Gone were the days when Charlie shied from participating in any social gathering or any personal relationship. Now, due to the encouragement and acceptance that he got from his friends; he is strong enough to participate boldly. For example, when Patrick, had some issue with his friend, and Patrick was very disturbed, it was Charlie who came forth and tried to alleviate his stress by suggesting a drink. He says, “It happened when Patrick has a problem with his boyfriend then Charlie tries to calm him down and accompany him to have a drink “Patrick and I have been spending a lot of time together. We drink a lot. It’s more like Patrick drinks, and I sip.”<sup>11</sup>

Charlie had never tasted alcohol. It is only after he comes in contact with the company of his friends that he starts consuming it. It is his friends who make him social and help him cease to be just a wallflower. This detached and antisocial behavior is called being a wallflower in the novel. In the novel, we see that Patrick depicts Charlie as an antisocial or a wallflower. A Wallflower denotes a flower vine on the wall. Charlie is compared to a wallflower. Patrick tells Charlie “You see things. You keep quiet about them. And you understand.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, we see that Charlie’s disposition was not of one who easily mixed and communicated with others.

Another trait of Charlie's character is that he is rather pedantic in approach. He is so insecure that he does not dare to confess his love to Sam because he is scared that she might not accept him. Charlie also displays a great passion for writing. Talking about Bill, Charlie reveals that Bill appreciated his talent, "He says that I have great skill in reading and understanding language and he wanted me to write an essay about To Kill a Mockingbird."<sup>13</sup> Charlie is made to keep secrets within himself. For instance, his father cries bitterly, when Aunt Helen dies. Charlie witnesses this but his Dad tells him not to tell anyone. Similarly, Charlie finds out that his friend Patrick is gay as he sees him kissing a guy. But Patrick asks him not to tell anyone. As his friend Patrick tells him, "Listen, Charlie. Brad does not want people to know. I need you to promise that you will not tell anyone. This will be our little secret. Okay?"<sup>14</sup>

Patrick tells everyone that Charlie is a wallflower. He tells Charlie, "You see things. You keep quiet about them. And you understand."<sup>15</sup> A very observant person by nature, Charlie keeps observing things. Charlie remarks, "I was just kind of watching people, seeing who was in love and who was just hanging around, and I was that kid I told you about."<sup>16</sup> Charlie is also a brave boy. When Sean bullies him and hits him, he fights back bravely to defend himself. Hitting strategically on Sean's knees, throat, and eyes, Charlie seems well-versed in defending himself. He was also a lover of Sports. As Charlie himself confesses, "I used to play sports when I was little, and I was actually very good."<sup>17</sup>

Sam and Patrick, not only instill confidence in Charlie, they teach him how to control his emotions too. Everything that Charlie finds disturbing, makes him react as an emotionally high-strung person. Either he bursts into tears or starts to lose his temper. On Michael's death by suicide, he breaks down, "The counsellor said that he suspected that Michael had "problems at home" and didn't feel like he had anyone to talk to. That's maybe why he felt all alone and killed himself. Then, I started screaming at the guidance counsellor that Michael could have talked to me. And I started crying even harder."<sup>18</sup> On the event of Charlie's birthday, aunt Helen was going to buy his birthday gift. Unfortunately, she meets with a car accident and dies. Guilt-ridden Charlie, therefore is never happy on his birthday. Reminded of Aunt Helen, the day fills him with sadness and guilt.

Charlie once reads his friend Patrick's poem to his friends. The name of the poem was "A Person/ A Paper/ A Promise Remembered." The above-mentioned poem depicts the growth of a boy into a man. Then the poem reveals that the speaker commits suicide because of his disillusionment with life. Initially, Charlie cannot fathom the reason behind any person's suicide. However, on New Year's Eve, Charlie pens a letter in which he admits that a specific occurrence has regrettably assisted him in taking grips of the real meaning of the poem: "I just remembered what made me think of all this. I'm going to write it down because maybe if I do I won't have to think about it. And I won't get upset. But the thing is that I can hear Sam and Craig having sex, and for the first time in my life, I understand the end of that poem. And I never wanted to. You have to believe me."<sup>19</sup> Thus, we may conclude that the sexual abuse that Charlie has to suffer causes him to bear Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Even though Charlie tries his best to comprehend himself and the way other people are formed, he ultimately concludes that the past can be cast aside and a new start can be made. We see that Charlie feels that though he is not responsible for the way his life has been shaped he does possess the capability to change the course of his life. How Charlie turns into an active member of society from being just a submissive and rather passive one in the contemporary social and cultural milieu is quite motivating. Assessing his maiden letter, Charlie comes to realize why his life is a

fusion of mirth and sorrow. Most importantly, he comes to understand that many perks are associated with the aspect of being a wallflower. In his last letter, he declares that he will put an end to his penning of letters and hopes that the person reading the letter will be assured that all will go on to be right in his life. Charlie's maturation thus becomes complete. Charlie comes forth now as a product of self-education. This metamorphosis becomes evident when we realize that the reader of Chbosky's novel is considered to be symbolic of the recipient of all the letters that Charlie penned. The recipient of Charlie's letters portrays the role of a "wiser" narrator, which is an integral feature of all conventional Bildungsroman novels.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower examines the sensitive issues related to adolescence, such as isolation, mental bewilderment, identity, friendship, first love, confusion, depression, relationships, and feeling lost to name a few. This epistolary novel contains scenes of both mental and physical violence and features sexual abuse heavily through its devastating consequences on Charlie and his peer group as they try to figure out their stand in this world in which they seem to be misfits. In The Perks of Being a Wallflower, Chbosky convincingly explores the fragile psyche of the adolescent and also extols the significance of how influential and detrimental his surroundings can be. Through his brilliant narrative technique, Chbosky very easily holds the reader's focus.

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