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Wallflowers in Bloom

The pastel tissue paper decorations are not the only wallflowers one will find that adorn the walls of a high school prom or graduation party. Wallflowers are also the people who are present but nonparticipant at the event. Stephen Chbosky puts the microscope on one such nonparticipant named Charlie in his book *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Through Charlie's perspective we are presented with the challenges an adolescent trauma survivor faces. Chbosky uses structure, characterization, setting and symbolism to remind the reader that in order to bloom, a wallflower must participate in life's opportunities for human connection.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower uses an epistolary structure which reveals information slowly, building suspense and connecting the reader to the story and its many conflicts. Each of the forty-eight letters follows the same structure, Charlie opens with "Dear Friend," (2) and closing with "Love Always, Charlie" (213). The letters are divided up into four parts with an epilogue, resembling a five act play. The letters dated August 25 to October 28, 1991 would be defined as the first act. It is in these epistles that our characters, their relationships, and the settings are introduced. The second act sets up the conflict among the characters in the letters written between November 7, 1991 and January 1, 1992. Act three contains the conflicts reaching their climax in the letters written between Jan 4, 1992 and April 26, 1992. The consequences of the actions in act three are revealed in the letters dated April 29, 1992 to June

22, 1992 and would constitute the fourth act. Finally, the epilogue serves as the fifth act, and what defines the work as a Greek tragedy, where catastrophe and irony strikes the protagonist in the final letter dated August 23, 1992. The epistolary structure adds an air of mischievousness for the reader, as the letters were not written for their eyes but for the eyes of a trusted confidant.

The characterization found in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is key to Charlie learning to bloom. The important characters in the story are named, and Charlie doesn't name any of his family except for one: Aunt Helen. Aunt Helen is the primary source of Charlie's detachment from human connection. She is described by Charlie as "... my favorite person in the whole world" (13), which compounds the tragic revelation that she is Charlie's sexual molester. Charlie recalls how, "... Aunt Helen was the only one who hugged me" (131), it becomes very evident that she has confused poor Charlie about what is appropriate touch and human connection. The next character we meet is Bill, who is Charlie's Advanced English teacher. Bill becomes a mentor to Charlie and tells him that "... we accept the love we think we deserve" (41). When Bill probes Charlie about his home life, Charlie confides in Bill about the abuse he witnessed happening to his sister. Bill encourages Charlie to participate in life, specifically calling for him to dance at the dances. Bill inspires Charlie, who takes his advise about participating with the help of his two new school friends.

The final two important characters to consider are Patrick and Sam. Patrick is in Charlie's shop class and becomes his first high school friend. He is gay and secretly dating the football team's quarterback, Brad. This secret love affair creates a conflict in which Charlie is given an opportunity to bloom by standing up for Patrick in a school fight. Patrick plays the lead role of Frank 'N Furter in *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which also gives Charlie an opportunity to

Bloom when he becomes depressed during his breakup with Brad. Charlie recalls that Patrick, “... seemed like the kind of guy you could just walk up to at a football game even though you were three years younger and not popular” (32). The next character who gets Charlie to bloom is Sam, and she is Patrick's half-sister. Charlie has a crush on Sam: “I was very happy to know that because I would really like to ask Sam on a date someday” (35). Sam cares for Charlie and forces Charlie bloom by initiating a dance with him at her graduation party. Sam is Charlie's personal confidant, evident when he recounts witnessing a star football player rape his girlfriend at a party thrown by his brother in their home. The characterization in Chbosky's work enables the reader to connect with each persona and engages them in the plot.

Chbosky's use of the setting impacts our protagonist in several profound ways. The city that the book takes place in is Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. While not directly revealed, it is revealed when Charlie says, “As we were approaching the Fort Pitt Tunnel, Sam asked Patrick to pull to the side of the road” (62). The severe winter weather that Pennsylvania is known for has a direct impact on plot, according to Charlie: “My Aunt Helen was in a terrible car accident. It was very snowy” (129). As previous discussed, Aunt Helen is the key reason Charlie is nonparticipant in life. The city is merely a backdrop, Charlie's house is the primary location where reflection and letter writing occurs. It is also the scene of Charlie's molestation, and the location he witnesses a rape. The more critical setting is Charlie's school, it serves as the fertile ground for blooming to transpire. It is in school where Charlie observes Patrick: “So, in shop class [Patrick] started to do a very funny impersonation of our teacher, Mr. Callahan” (24). It is also at the School where he meets Bill. Later, at a football game on school grounds, one of Charlie's first blossoms occurs when he introduces himself to Patrick. He also gets revenge on the rapist by

letting the air out of his truck tires during the homecoming game. It is clear that the setting is a critical component to the story, affording opportunity and conflict to the protagonist.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower contains many significant elements of symbolism that reappear as the story unfolds. The tunnel symbolizes transformation, as explained by Charlie: “You start on one side of the mountain, and it's dark ... Then, you're in the middle of the tunnel, and everything becomes a calm dream. .. And finally, just when you think you'll never get there, you see the opening right in front of you. ... And you fly out of the tunnel onto the bridge. And there it is. The city. A million lights and buildings and everything seems as exciting as the first time you saw it” (270). Dancing is symbolic of participating, in which we see a transformation within Charlie. The first time he references dancing, Charlie states that “At the school dances, I sit in the background, and I tap my toe, and I wonder how many couples will dance to 'their song’” (39), but we then see him bloom at the graduation party. As Charlie recalls, “She led me to the dance floor. And she started dancing. And I started dancing” (271).

Another symbolic element is french fries, which represent comfort. Charlie writes that, “...my older brother came to Mr. Vaughn's office in my middle school and told me to stop crying. ... We then went to eat french fries at McDonald's” (9) and one cannot help but reflect upon that when Charlie observes a little kid lost at mall who upon being reunited with his mom tells her he wants french fries. In the epilogue, Charlie says that “... it was so nice to be with my mom and eat french fries” (298) after he is released from the hospital. The book also uses the American pastime of watching television as a symbol of bonding with the family. Charlie writes that, “The family was sitting around, watching the final episode of M*A*S*H, and I'll never forget it even though I was very young” (29). He also makes mention that the only Thanksgiving that his

family didn't fight was the one where they brought the VHS recording of his brother's big Penn State football game.

While television represented bonding with his family, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* represented bonding with his friends. Charlie says that, "Of all the things I've done this year so far, I think I like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* the best" (71). Charlie likes it so much that he "... start working for a fanzine called *Punk Rocky*. It's this xerox magazine about punk rock and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*" (70). Each of these symbols is important to the telling of the story, but some are more obvious than others despite their repetitious use throughout the book.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower grants the reader an inside look at a teenager passing through the tunnel from adolescence into adulthood. It is evident that Choboksy elegantly leveraged structure, characterization, setting and symbolism to stimulate his wallflower to bloom. It is both timeless and timely, addressing many taboo subjects such as the normalization of homosexuality, rape, and drug use. Every taboo that the book touches are taboos that are still relevant to today's budding wallflowers.

Works Cited

Chbosky, Stephen. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. New York: MTV /Gallery, 2012. Print.