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Haleigh Altman

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Haleigh Altman

ENGL 370

Dr. Brownson

Transitioning Theme in Chbosky's Adaptation of *The Perks of Being A Wallflower*

Stephen Chbosky's film adaptation of his novel *The Perks of Being A Wallflower* follows freshman student Charlie as he struggles to find his place in high school, that is until he meets step siblings Sam and Patrick. They not only allow him into their friend group, but they also allow him to witness their own personal pains. Even though the author of the novel is the director of the film adaptation, the two mediums tell the story to audiences in different ways. The novel was written from Charlie's often naive perspective, but the gravity of his trauma is not lost on readers, even though it may, at times, be lost on Charlie himself. However, the film adaptation allows the vibrance of Patrick and Sam to pull viewers to see the events that are happening around Charlie, rather than allow them the space to question what is contributing to Charlie's wallflower-like tendencies. While the novel and the film adaptation are both wonderful in their own rights, the success of this film does not fully equate to it being a successful adaptation. *The Perks of Being A Wallflower* is a relatively successful adaptation because while Chbosky sheds light on all the important scenes from the novel, the spotlight is given to Charlie's friends over his family and himself; the adaptation does open up the novel by showing audiences Sam and Patrick's struggles with belongingness instead of telling readers through Charlie's letters, but the film ultimately loses the novel's predominant themes of exploring mental health and dealing with trauma in adolescence because all viewers may not recognize the subtle clues to Charlie's aunt molesting him.

The adaptation falls short because it is trying to make the story of an outsider relatable, pitching Charlie as an “adolescent everyman” (Bickmore & Youngblood 253). The novel was written for the cult following it quickly procured, the ones who do not feel seen by their peers but are delighted to feel seen by this novel. The film was made to appeal to the masses, and it essentially “goes Hollywood” to guarantee it will appeal to those masses (Desmond and Hawkes 237). The first step in shifting this narrative to be more mainstream was casting Emma Watson as Sam and Logan Lerman as Charlie. The NPR segment "The Art Of Preserving A High School 'Wallflower'" featuring *New York Magazine* critic David Edelstein discusses how it is difficult for viewers to see these actors as anyone other than themselves, even though they fill their roles well. The film adaptation follows the larger trend of casting established actors who are years older than the actors they play. Edelstein even describes Charlie as “pathetic and annoying” because he sees Charlie as Logan Lerman, not a fifteen year old boy who is struggling to deal with the trauma of losing his best friend to suicide while navigating his entrance into adolescence ("The Art Of Preserving A High School 'Wallflower'").

Alternatively, the novel avoids reducing Charlie to a painfully naive teenage boy simply by setting him as the narrator. Even if readers cannot fully take on Charlie’s perspective due to their own age and experience, they can at least reminisce, remembering a time when they too were starry eyed and hopeful in spite of the world being consistently unfair. The film does lend itself to Colton Brown and Tonya R. Hammer’s understanding of high school as an individualistic time in life, one that comes at the expense of interpersonal connections as discussed in their article “The Perks of Being Relational: Reviewing The Perks of Being a Wallflower.” (260). However, the adaptation still romanticizes the high school experience in a

way that is not entirely accessible to the general population *because* it glosses over the traumatic scenes that are more fleshed out in the novel.

Alongside Charlie's coming of age story, Chbosky's novel more directly addresses mental health issues starting from the first few pages of the novel. Charlie's first letter to his unknown friend addresses Michael's suicide, his struggle with understanding how he feels "both happy and sad" at the same time, and his Aunt Helen's unknown trauma (Chbosky 2-3). The novel was published in 1999, a time when the discussion of mental health issues was not prevalent and rarely positive. While the novel does not explicitly state Charlie's diagnosis, it does not relegate Charlie's trauma and subsequent struggles to the background like the film adaptation does, even though the latter was released in 2012. In the thirteen years between the release of the novel and the film, discussions of mental health have become normalized in entertainment media, but the film adaptation of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* mainly refers to Charlie's trauma as a "tough time" (Chbosky). Omitting some of the more explicit discussions of Aunt Helen's molestation of Charlie may have been a sacrifice for the sake of hitting the target PG-13 rating, which is discussed explicitly in the cast commentary version of the film (Chbosky). As a director, Chbosky chooses to devote more screen time to Patrick's struggling relationship, perhaps because closeted homosexuality is a very relevant modern issue, even if the events are not set in present day. It is much easier for modern viewers to stomach Brad's father hitting him than it is for them to see and recognize that Charlie was molested as a young child.

As a director, Chbosky still attempts to convey Charlie's more painful experiences, which some viewers are somewhat cognizant of, due to the wintery imagery. The novel dedicates a significant number of pages to December 24th, both in the present day and in the year Aunt Helen died. The film attempts to visualize this by showing flashbacks of Charlie as a child

interspersed with images of him in the snow, and readers of the novel can make the connection. Charlie is emotionally frozen, consistently avoiding reading into his past as he would rather spend his time trying to “participate.” However, when he experiments with LSD and marijuana, his emotions are thawed because his drugged brain does not have the capability to subconsciously push down his traumatic memories of his aunt. He is also unable to ignore his trauma in emotionally heated moments, such as when he defends Patrick against Brad and the other football players (Chbosky). Charlie feels disassociated from himself in these moments because he is so often concerned with thinking about what other people are doing, he sometimes almost forgets that he also exists. Young Charlie does not have the capacity to deal with his own emotions, let alone help his friends process theirs. In “Evaluating Representations of Mental Health in Young Adult Fiction: The Case of Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*,” Alison Monaghan discusses this in her criteria for accurate representations of mental health, as the protagonist should reflect the knowledge of someone his age under the circumstances in which he finds himself (40). Charlie offers all he can—his presence and his unwavering support. This often means he is pushed outside his comfort zone to truly come into his own, which is a paramount element of the adolescent experience.

It is clear that the novel and film are both well loved by audiences because it offers a parallel to their own lives, particularly the universal struggle of belongingness in adolescence. The beauty of Chbosky’s works is that he brings humanity to all of his characters as none of the characters are innately bad people, they sometimes just do bad things (*The Guardian*). The film certainly does a better job of showing the struggles of characters besides Charlie, as readers of the novel are not privy to the inner thoughts of the other characters. The reactions of these characters are shown in real time instead of Charlie describing them afterwards to his anonymous

friend. However, the letter format of the novel does allow readers an intimate introduction into Charlie's psyche, something that cannot be replicated through the limited use of voice overs in the film adaptation.

The shift in medium opens up of the film, but it does come at the expense of reducing Charlie to *one* of the three main characters as opposed to *the* main character. After the homecoming dance and party scenes where both Charlie and the audience are introduced to the other characters, the film effectively shifts to Patrick's forbidden romance with the high school quarterback and Charlie's shyness almost becomes an endearing bit (Chbosky). Patrick later makes a toast to Charlie as a wallflower who "sees things and understands," but Charlie is mostly portrayed as a loyal confidant, not as an individual with serious problems worthy of their concern (Chbosky). Sam and Patrick are trying to get into college and navigate their romantic relationships while Charlie is attempting to find his place in their friend group and land his first girlfriend. The focus does shift to Charlie as he struggles through his relationship with Mary Elizabeth, even though he has a crush on Sam (Chbosky). However, it plays almost as a humorous interlude to the larger drama of the narrative. Charlie's situation really only emotionally impacts viewers when he kisses Sam, "the prettiest girl in the room," on a dare and effectively humiliates Mary Elizabeth (Chbosky). While it is an effective adaptation because it brings Patrick, Sam, and their problems to life, it almost forces Charlie's narrative to the back burner, unless his actions directly impact the other two.

In taking the novel from the page to the screen, Chbosky chose to cut many of the scenes that provided background to Charlie's family life. While his sister is more present in the film than the rest of the family, her character is essentially reduced to only a single slap across the face. This felt like one of the first emotionally weighted scenes of the film and Charlie is, as

always, the unfortunate witness who did not quite understand why she would not let him protect her. As inexperienced as he is, Charlie never hesitates to jump to the defense of those he loves. Even as a young teenager, Charlie forces his own personal trauma aside to take his sister to an abortion clinic (Chbosky 117). In the midst of helping his sister and keeping her abortion a secret, Charlie is again reminded of his Aunt Helen. In the film, Charlie has limited flashbacks of his aunt following his intimate moments with Sam, the only truly influential woman who experienced trauma somewhat comparable to Aunt Helen and was prevalent in the film. Alternatively, the intimate familial moments in the novel consistently lead back to his aunt, which guides readers to anticipate the impending reveal about Aunt Helen in the last chapter.

In a sort of parallel, it is not until the end of the film that the audience is privy to the hidden mental health issues that Charlie, Sam, and Patrick are struggling with. These mental health issues go beyond the everyday high school experience, even though it is still relatively easy for viewers to relate to them. In the novel, Sam boils down Charlie's struggle to help when she says "it's like you can come to Patrick's rescue and hurt two guys that are trying to hurt him, but what about when Patrick's hurting himself?" (Chbosky 201). All three of the main characters are running away from their problems, going so fast that they do not have the opportunity to look within and wallow, as it would almost be too painful. In the film adaptation, the characters evade their problems so well, the audience cannot fully deduce what issues they are dealing with.

Even then, Sam and Patrick's issues are shown and stated explicitly while Charlie's is ultimately implied. Sam's cloudy past with party boys and forced first kiss with her dad's boss haunts her, and she tries to leave it in the past until she found out Craig cheated on her and her insecurities came flooding back. Patrick is out of the closet but his boyfriend is not, and their forced separation is making him unbearably depressed (Chbosky). All viewers really know about

Charlie is that he has been hospitalized before, he is struggling with his friend Michael's suicide, and he blames himself for his Aunt Helen's death. Viewers may not necessarily see Charlie as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (Monaghan 39). They may just see a grieving teenage boy who is struggling to deal with the deaths of those he loved dearly, those who he felt truly understood him.

The film mentions Aunt Helen a lot less frequently, at least explicitly, so her influence on his life and the nature of their relationship is less apparent to audiences. There are strange lingering shots on his Aunt Helen, particularly during a flashback Charlie has when Sam is rubbing her hand over his upper thigh, which is then mirrored by his aunt also touching his leg when he was a child while telling him "not to wake his sister" (Chbosky). While child molestation is a very taboo subject, particularly because she is deceased and a family member, the translation of the film's themes of mental health would have greatly benefited from more explicitly stating what happened to Charlie. Identifying the illnesses or conditions being explicitly articulated in the narrative is necessary to accurately portray a picture of mental health (Monaghan 38). If Charlie's trauma is not fully explored, viewers cannot pick up on the larger implications of what it means to deal with childhood trauma and explore their newfound identity at the same time.

The hospital scenes from both the novel and the film are particularly telling. That part of the film is heavily visualized with little actual dialogue, music and voiceover played during the scene do little to communicate effectively with the audience. In the epilogue of the novel, it is actually revealed to readers that his aunt had molested him, but he could not fully blame her because he understood all of the trauma she endured. He just decided not to let the cycle of hurt continue; in remembering what happened to him, he was able to let go of the past and he decided



that he would not inflict that same tainted love on someone else (Chbosky 211). In the year of his life that is shown in the novel and the film, Charlie comes to learn what real love is, love that is not conditional to what it can offer the other person, but a love that shows the unwavering support from both parties no matter what.

Sam and Patrick usher him into a world of excitement with sadness existing along the edges and in quiet moments, even in the very last scene. Their struggles are drowned out by their singing of “Heroes” by The Wallflowers from the bed of Sam’s pickup truck. The film keeps the more poetic scenes and quotes, but Chbosky as a director is almost afraid to show the most raw scenes that would truly make audiences feel something other than enamored by the intimate witnessing of Charlie’s transition into adolescence. The film brings many scenes to life that were only discussed in passing in the novel, but those scenes mostly contribute to the high school aesthetic of the film. There was an attempt to showcase a bit more of Charlie’s breakdown, particularly by having him call his sister (Chbosky). The film allows viewers to experience Charlie’s panic attack through his eyes, shown by the cloudy and unstable camera. The audience can feel how detached he is from reality, but almost immediately after he returns from the hospital, his mental health almost feels glossed over yet again. While the film has short bursts of impactful, emotionally weighted scenes, there is just not enough space to let viewers ruminate in those feelings before the mood changes and the pain is pushed down yet again.

The film and the novel are both great in their own rights. Both offer a fresh take on a coming of age story, one that keeps viewers anxious to know and see more, whether that is because of excitement or morbid curiosity. The film is beautiful in so many ways with a great cast and visually exciting scenes. It is clear that as a director, Chbosky wanted viewers to be locked into the film. However, he failed to strongly hold onto the themes of mental health while

widening the scope of the film. The film adaptation still works as a coming of age story, it just does not work quite as well as a mental health focused coming of age story.

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