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Repression and Detention against Incarnation of other sexualities in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

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Abstract

This article examines Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* as a narrative that highlights the importance of identity recognition and the psychological consequences of social neglect, with a specific focus on how silence around sexuality shapes adolescent development. While the novel has been widely discussed for its coming-of-age themes, there is a gap in scholarly attention to the intersections of sexual repression, trauma, and identity formation through the frameworks of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucault's theories of sexuality and power. The objective of this study is to analyze the protagonist Charlie's emotional and sexual development in the context of social censorship, trauma, and institutional silence. Using qualitative textual analysis, the paper applies Lacan's concept of the unconscious and symbolic order, alongside Foucault's discourse on the history of sexuality and madness, to explore how Charlie's past—marked by sexual abuse, loss, and emotional alienation. The findings suggest that the repression of dialogue around sex and trauma not only isolates individuals but also delays self-understanding and healing. The study recommends fostering open, inclusive conversations about identity and sexuality in educational and familial settings, and encourages further literary analysis of adolescent trauma using psychoanalytic and Foucauldian frameworks.

Keywords: Repetition, Repression, Detention, Psychological approach

Introduction

Stephen Chbosky's (2012) epistolary novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is narrated in the form of a letter by the main character Charlie to his anonymous friend. The novel unfolds the events of alcohol use, drug use, homosexual relationships, and the psychological trauma faced by teenagers. Sexuality preferences questions the straight forward long historical practices, which have been embedded in society, either intentionally or unintentionally; however, not considered as a main part of the society. Foucault considers treatment of such sexuality as state repercussive ideology. Charlie, a main protagonist from the novel *The Perks of being a Wallflower*, involuntarily prefers homosexuality. Silent Charlie starts his first year of high school upon the demise of his best pal. He is an innocent boy (Jensen, 2022). However, this character has been sexually abused by his most-loved Aunt Helen in his early childhood, before her death. Charlie is often misunderstood that his sad due to his aunt's death. He is partially upset because he loved his aunt but dominantly by aunt's sexual abuse (Gupta, 2023). The pertinent issue is all about the abuse from heterosexual to homosexual and at the same time practice of pedophilia. Furthermore, the constant visit to psychiatrist symbolically refers to a dungeon for the people who misfits in a heterosexual society.

Most of the characters who are homosexuals are sent to the detention center or psychiatrist for the treatment of their "deviation" from the preferred sexuality by the society. Jonathan Kemp states in his book *Homotopia*, "Under the epistemological regime of Lack/Difference homosexual desire has become heterosexualised and hierarchical binarism penetrator/ penetrated is established within which same sex pairing is ignored" (Kemp, 2015, p. 10). Charlie is submissive, shy, and fears a lot about loss, which arduously signifies the actions of the members of the society understanding about the alternative sexualities. Disorder causes more distress to the authoritative figure than the so-called patient in question, and in this context, Thomas Szasz urges, "The disorder generally causes more distress to those around him or her than to the person himself or herself. In short, although all these activities are viewed as intentional, they are nevertheless categorized as mental disease" (Szasz, 1999, p. 219). This paper analyzes Charlie's writings from the perspective of Foucault's penal system, surveillance, and the state's incarnation of sexual misfits or homosexual as mentally ill. Most often, those who are homosexual are under constant surveillance by their parents and regularly visit psychiatrists. Neither the family members nor the medical treatment system has recognized that, "madness enhances rather than diminishes as a person dignity and stature as a human being" (Szasz, 1999, p. 220). This paper highlights Foucault's idea of insanity as birth of state power along with the History of Sexualities through the references of Lacan psychoanalysis in shaping one's sexualities.

Methods and Materials

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, using close reading to examine key scenes that reveal the psychological and emotional development of the protagonist, Charlie. The analysis is grounded in Lacanian psychoanalysis, particularly concepts of the unconscious, symbolic order, and identity formation, alongside Michel Foucault's theories from *The History of Sexuality and Madness and Civilization*, which explore how power structures regulate discourse on sex and sanity. By integrating these theoretical frameworks, the study interprets how social silences and institutional repression shape Charlie's internal conflicts and self-perception.

The authors would apply a qualitative textual analysis approach to scrutinize the psychological dimensions embedded in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. The primary data source was the chosen novel itself, while secondary sources constituted peer-reviewed articles, books, and supporting literature related to religion, morality, and adolescent development (Warren, 2025).

Results and Discussion

The novel has been viewed differently by many scholars. Likewise, without analyzing the post-traumatic disorder of Charlie, the writing would not take shape. The novel secretly unfolds the events that have been affected by the sexual abuse and molestation by his favorite aunt Helen. Austriani (2016) postulates the idea of post-traumatic disorder and the consequences. As an approach to analysis, she hinges on the idea of post-traumatic disorder to define his sexuality leaving behind the idea of repetition and the repression that actually are also shaping his sexualities. She posits, "According to DSM fourth edition, there are five diagnostic symptoms of PTSD; exposure to stressor, re-experiencing event, avoidance, arousal, duration of the symptoms and life disrupted. The writer analyzes Charlie, the major character of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* novel, who shows PTSD criteria" (Austriani, 2016, p. 6).

Even though Charlie remembers and confesses the reality of his childhood, he is not able to recover fully to identify who he is. However, it is crucial to note that Austriani's analysis leaves out the idea of Lacan's four fundamental principles of psychoanalysis from the eponymous work and Foucault's idea of repression and confession to interpret the talk of sexual abuse and the sexualities. Ducker (2017) interprets Chbosky's novel from the point of emotion and form. Ducker (2017) examines the central figure of Charlie as "Despair, sadness, self-doubt, occasional glimpses of hope

and a deep longing for love are only some of the emotions dominating Charlie's coming of age" (p. 156). Ducker (2017) proposes the idea that "epistolary form constitutes a vital tool in Charlie's learning about his identity formation and initiation into the adult world" (p. 159).

He argues that letter writing helps him to recognize the difference between real love and molestation because what he thinks love throughout the novel is actually molestation by his

favorite aunt Helen. His later decision making about friendship, love, nuances of family relation to him is affected by his relation to the most-loved Aunt. Ducker (2017) is of the view that because of the letter writing he ultimately distinguishes what it means to be "from passive observer of life to an active participant" (p. 159). With referencing to idea of cruel optimism, Ducker is more interested in why Charlie has been positioned as an outsider and why he is unable to express his feelings; however, at the same time, he interprets "how letter writing eventually helps Charlie succeed in coming to terms with his past and implications for his future" (Ducker, 2017, p. 159).

Repetition, Repression, and Detention

Charlie gets across the traumatic experiences in his childhood growing up, may it be the death of his favorite Aunt Helen in a car crash or the molestation by the same individual in his childhood. His experience is repressed as a defense mechanism to move on and live further. Repression approaches him as he feels surrounded by different powers, which instigate him to think the way he thinks. However, this repression plays a great role in shaping his way of thinking and his behavior. Critic Tritest (2000), while explaining about the adolescent protagonist who undergoes through many different powers in her book, *Disturbing the Universe*, writes that adolescent protagonists "learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function, including family; school; the church; the government; social constructions of sexuality, gender, race, class; and cultural mores surrounding death" (Tritest, 2000, p. 3). "Gender is non-biological and is constructed through societal and cultural beliefs by those men who are in power" (Sherma, 2025, p. 98). Society is regulated by men in power. So, social constructs do not change until men's power is threatened through awareness and women bonding. In Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie continues moving on in his life repressing his painful memories and remembering the good ones. He continues to live as per the social rules. He tries behaving how he should be behaving despite his repressed thoughts in him. His passivity—his living with psychological, emotional and social issues—explains his traumatic experience while growing up which is the result of the repression of the painful memories he had.

Cicarelli (2009) posits, “Repression is the refusal to consciously remember threatening or conflicting situations” (p. 461). She anticipates human beings tend to refuse to recall the deleterious memories which are hurtful and distressing to remember quite often. In the same way, Charlie, the protagonist, inclines to forget the disturbing section of his memory with his favorite Aunt Helen with whom he shares a very special bond. She was not only her favorite

one but also the one who abused Charlie sexually. However, Charlie represses his torturous memory with sweet, kind and lovely memories of his with Aunt Helen. He remembers his Aunt Helen giving him two gifts a year, one at Christmas and another on his birthday, whereas others would give only one a year on Christmas. He reminisces about his Aunt Helen’s death on his birthday in a car crash when she went to buy him a gift. Whenever he recalls Aunt Helen, Charlie feels anxious and gets troubled. At the end of the novel, Charlie writes in his letter that Aunt Helen was “doing what Sam was doing” (Chbosky, 2012, p. 213). And this leads to why Charlie is the way he is, silent, observant, shy, and a wallflower. What we propose here is that besides the confession through writing letters, repression and the role of the family, medical institution, educational institution and subtle detention have shaped his internal emotions and his relation with the outer world. Along with that, repetition and repression shape his memories. His memories of Aunt Helen are sweet, but deep down in his unconscious there is molestation. Even though Charlie is able to distinguish the difference between real love and molestation, he is not fully able to forget his past as the last line of the novel shades light as he tells his girlfriend to “believe that things are good with me and even when they're not, they will be soon enough” (Chbosky, 2012, p. 213). Important aspects to shape one's emotions, feelings, and identity, the roles that institutions and their power over the people play crucial roles. In this regard, there is a subtle impact of the family, society, educational institution and medical institution for the suppression of sexual abuse as well as shaping sexuality.

The embedded issues about the sex always lie on how the state has defined it or politicized it. Nevertheless, the protagonist of the novel clearly later on identifies himself as a gay; however, as being a child he cannot understand the role of the family, school and the medical institutions. The role of family, school, and medical institutions are even shaped by the ideology of the state regarding sexuality, which has been injected in the fragmented form in a different way by different institutions. Similarly, Aunt Helen, who herself has been suffered in family relations, both by her husband and her father, abuses her cousin and delineates the psychology about the sex where Charlie becomes victimized. In this sense, Charlie as a child suffers in two ways: First, ideology of the state regarding sexualities; and second, the trauma of his aunt which is reflected on sexual abuse to him.

Here, the issues are: “[W]hat makes one erotic activity good and another bad? Is it a matter of divine ordinance, biological nature or social convention” (Spargo, 1999, p. 5). At the same time Foucault argues that “sexuality is not a natural feature or fact of human life but a constructed category of experience which has historical, social and cultural, rather than biological, origin” (Foucault, 2020, p. 12).

Even though it seems that sexuality is a personal choice, actually it is not entirely as we think. Charlie in his first letter mentions suicide of Michel, where Charlie writes, “[M]ichael 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” (Chbosky, 2012, p. 4). Michael is gay and his parents never take their child as normal rather they put him in detention. His father beats him severely. Neither the medical institution nor the detention center or the family took his sexuality as normal. Instead of that Michael misfit in hetero normativity, this compels him to take his life. The letters written by Charlie have subtle impact on this suicide. It is because he most often assumes and behaves in such a way that society or the state demands, which later on forces him to suffer mentally and visits a psychiatrist.

The most important issue is: what is the foundation of sexuality? Is sexuality contextualized, universal or can it be defined as a local and everyday issue? While bringing sexuality together with insanity it confounds the linear discourses regarding the idea of development of sexuality, which has been practiced for a long period of time. Similarly, Lacan talks about the “repetition” in his book *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, which becomes truth ultimately. The repetitive molestation of Charlie every Saturday has been a normal truth for him and blurs the real reality of sexuality. He represses the truth of molestation, and this repression gradually grows into mental disorder, and because of which, he finds it difficult to be open to everyone. He confesses everything to an unknown friend, his confession is, to put in Foucault’s words, “one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth” (Foucault, 2020, p. 8). Both insanity and sexuality are defined and controlled by power and the discourse has been shadowed —further, Foucault argues, “The most defenseless tenderness and the bloodiest of powers have a similar need of confession” (Foucault, 2020, p. 59). However, Charlie does not confess to the people he knows, as he seems to be apprehensive of the risks; rather, he reveals his secrets to unknown friends so that they may not prove to be damaging after revelation. The different sexualities have been termed as insanity or they have been detained to make them sane, which either is state controlled or discourse created by the society. The underlying foundation of heterosexuality is to negate the other sexualities as part of society; therefore, they are outcasts from the family, too. It is unfortunate that one’s mere preference

for sexual orientation results in division into the sane and insane on the basis of privileged discourse of heterosexuality.

The Psychological Approach

From a psychoanalytical stance, Charlie's routine letter writing is expression, instead of repression: It is "not to silence or repress sexuality but to make people speak about it (and so themselves) in a particular way" (Spargo, 1999, p. 14). Charlie is rendered incompatible to assimilate in and by the society that he is part of, without much choice; however, he tries a lot to normalize the situation and makes efforts to belong to the mainstream. Intrinsically, nobody traces how Charlie's sense of repression and trauma slip into his consciousness and readers, at first turn, may conclude that he will have to live with this nasty experience throughout his life, similar to Erika Sanchez (Sherma, 2023).

Nevertheless, his forced infatuation towards women is just an attempt to assimilate into the society, while silencing his instinctual libido. He is being treated as if the whole modern society was sick, and banality for different sexualities is an unspoken compulsion. When we see the psychological aspect of the family, we find the deterministic psychological approach as if all people were mentally sick and they needed treatment. The requirement of regular psychiatric

consultation and follow-ups indicates that the very institution is mentally sick from inside; however, Charlie is more relieved through his writings rather than the regular checkups. However, this is contrary to Freud's claim that psychological wellbeing is directly linked to the conversation with a counsellor or therapist (Singh, 2023). Medical treatment of Charlie or the regular visit to the hospital cannot be categorized as sole medical purpose as Foucault in his book *Madness and Civilization* urges, "it is rather a sort of semi judicial structure, an administrative entity which, along with the already constituted powers, executes" (Foucault, 2006, p. 40). Actually, those doctors who perform their medical practice are "appointed a doctor at a salary of one of the thousand lives a year" (Foucault, 2006, p. 40).

Those doctors have to perform under the rules and regulations regulated by the state and impart the state idea regarding psychology and sexualities. In this case, Foucault again urges, "[W]hat the meaning was of this proximity which seems to assign the same homeland to the poor, to the unemployed, to prisoners and to insane" (Foucault, 2006, p. 39). Thomas Szasz (1996) makes a critical analysis regarding the psychiatrist doctor as he explains psychiatrist as, "who was both seen and defined as an expert and on alienation and the keeper of alienated persons" (p. 235). Charlie

most of the time finds himself being alienated from the family, society and friend circle as he says, “I usually walk home from the school because it makes me feel like I've earned it. What I mean is that I want to be able to tell my kids that I walked to school like my grandparents did in the ‘old days.’ It's odd that I am planning this considering I've never had a date, but I guess that makes sense” (Szasz, 1996, pp. 24-25). This habitual occurrence at a deeper level suggests that he commutes from home to his school all alone and imagines about begetting a child. His imagination of having a child is the imagination of heterosexual normative because he is yet to identify his sexuality clearly. He never talks about the sex with his parents because “on the subject of sex, silence became the rule” (Foucault, 2020, p. 27). Similarly, in the novel, since there is not a lot of space for the discussion about sexuality, only a few friends talk about it openly in a secret place. School, family, medical institutions all are silent as, “it is true that longstanding ‘freedom’ of language between children and adults, or pupils and teachers, may have disappeared” (Foucault, 2020, p. 27).

The analysis shows that rather than treating teenage sexuality and psychological distress as purely personal pathology *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* portrays them as results of repression maintained by familial educational and medical institutions. According to Chbosky (2012), Charlie's fragmented emotional development arises from the repeated silencing of sexual discourse where trauma associated with childhood abuse is displaced into repression and shows up as passive dissociation and difficulty forming intimate relationships. According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, Charlie's unconscious uses repetition to resolve contradictory memories of abuse and affection, stabilizing a warped symbolic order and preventing explicit sexual self-identification. Concurrently, a Foucauldian perspective shows how moral control psychiatric intervention and surveillance portray non-normative sexualities as abnormal or pathological which perpetuates isolation rather than healing (Foucault, 2020). The results also imply that same-sex intimacy is experienced in private and without social legitimacy while Charlie is forced to engage in performative desire due to mandatory heterosexual norms. These findings are consistent with larger criticisms of how power generates truth about sexuality through confession and silence (Spargo, 1999; Kemp, 2015). In general, repression serves as the primary mechanism through which trauma is prolonged identity formation is postponed, and adolescent subjectivity is disciplined within heteronormative structures as opposed to overt violence alone.

Conclusion

The growth of Charlie is all about the silence of sex. He becomes blackout because he is not able to discuss openly about what has gone on in his life. Foucault in this sense clarifies,

“without even having to pronounce the word, modern prudishness was able to ensure that one speaks of sex merely through the interplay of prohibition that referred back one another: instances of muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence Censorship” (Foucault, 2020, p. 17). His relationship with his friends and other members is determined by his hanging past of Childhood. He lets Patrick kiss and stops Sam to consummate because the first is occurring by his own will and the second is a reminder of repetition of sexual molestation. Even though Charlie does not mention it clearly, actually Sam trying to make love is also a kind of molestation to homosexuals by heterosexual in the view of the fact that homosexual do not enjoy hetero sex. However, Charlie has to do so because throughout his life he has learnt only hetero sexual characteristics. It is because power-controlled discussion of sex, “where and when it was not possible to talk about such things became more strictly defined” (Foucault, 2020, p. 18). The censorship discursively limited the discussion between parents and children, pupils and teachers, which ultimately repressed the discourse on sex. He is treated differently after the revelation because “madness is isolated, treated in special manner, manifested in its singularity as if, though belonging to unreason, it is nonetheless traversed that domain by movement peculiar itself, ceaselessly referring from itself to its most paradoxical extreme” (Foucault, 2006, p. 83). Due to censorship on discussion Charlie repressed what has gone on in his childhood. There is a blur line between his sexuality because his actions are not all clear about whether he is homosexual or heterosexual. He loves Sam but does not let her touch his genitalia in the course of sexual intercourse and at the same time he lets Patrick kiss, but he ignores that he enjoyed it. His effeminate characteristics: however, divulges his inclination for the homosexual relations because he accepts Patrick's kiss and ignorance of Sam sex subtly clarifies his desires. He represses his aunt's relation with him which indicatively suggests that we have to make discourse on sex as Foucault clarifies, “[W]hether in the form of a subtle confession in confidence or authoritarian interrogation, sex—be it refined or rustic —had to be put into words” (Foucault, 2006, p. 32).

The primary subject of this article is to determine the psychoanalysis of the protagonist, Charlie, in reference to the four fundamentals of psychoanalysis introduced by Freud and later illustrated by Jacques Lacan. The analytical perspective suggests that Charlie has trouble in maintaining a stable social and sexual environment which can be credited to his relationship with his Aunt Helen. Unbeknownst to Charlie, his problematic relationship with Aunt Helen manifests itself in such a way that he cannot form a stable relationship with other females. It is revealed that he was a victim of sexual abuse with the perpetrator being Aunt Helen.

The four fundamental concepts of the unconscious, repetition, transference and drive help to explain how and why his past affects his present. First of all, the narration of Charlie is presented through his diary where he talks affectionately about his aunt. It is then shown that she was involved in a car accident because of which she passed away. This sad story about his aunt makes Charlie feel empathy towards his aunt because the day she passed away she went to buy a gift for him. His unconsciousness makes him believe that his aunt loved and cherished him despite the fact that she abused him. The unconscious suppresses the disturbing fact about his aunt and only enhances her caressing nature. But the unconscious also prevails to stop him from reaching intimacy with the people around him because psychologically his unconscious is traumatized by the behavior of Aunt Helen and does not allow it to emerge in his consciousness. On the other hand, the repetition of his fond memories creates a story within his mind about Aunt Helen. On the one hand, the unconscious suppresses the demonic nature of his aunt whereas on the other hand repetition of the fond memories of his aunt allows his consciousness to address his aunt of having a loving persona.

Lacan suggests that the love towards Aunt Helen creates a negative transference that dissuades him from having a feasible social relation. This in turn makes him apathetic towards the peers and even his love interests. The drive to be involved emotionally with Sam enunciates his deep desires suppressed by the unconscious. This drive makes him relentlessly pursue Sam despite her rejection. Hence, the four fundamentals explain the distinct behavior of Charlie. His apathy, reluctance towards wanting Sam, and his disinterest towards the social structure causes him to be the Wallflower.

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