

# Writing through Growth, Growth through Writing:

*The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and the Narrative of Development

**A**long with celebrated novels such as J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (henceforth *Perks*) is approached by many as one of the most honest literary portrayals of teenage life within the last decades. Since its original publication in 1999, it is considered an influential text for young readers across the country due to its sincere and candid depiction of contemporary American teenage life. However, it has also gained infamy for being one of the most banned books in recent times (according to the American Library Association<sup>1</sup>) because of its depiction of controversial themes and issues such as sexual abuse, drug use, and homosexuality, among others. Despite this notoriety, the popularity of *Perks* and the fascination it has exerted upon contemporary readers is undisputed.

It is thus somewhat foreseeable that *Perks* is commonly found within the top ten books in the "Classic literature and fiction" section in Amazon.com, often surpassing eminent texts such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954/ 2003) and even Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939/2002). Hence, despite the fact that the book's protagonist is a teenager, and despite the fact that the text is primarily approached by readers in a high school context, the quality of the writing, the novel's realistic tone, and the depth of the

issues discussed in its pages have assured its position as a contemporary young adult *and* literary classic.

This discussion will call attention to the issue of social and personal development in *Perks*, focusing on how the novel appropriates and transmutes the conventions of the formation novel, formally known as the *Bildungsroman*<sup>2</sup>, through the process and configuration of letter writing. Although the novel is written in an epistolary fashion, focusing on a series of letters sent to an undisclosed recipient, the overarching themes of these musings create a social space in which the protagonist can record, evaluate, and

1. *Perks* is number 10 in the top 100 most banned books between 2000–2009 according to [www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org).

2. Within literary criticism, a coming-of-age novel is typically referred to as a *Bildungsroman* (plural *Bildungsromane*), which literally translates into "novels of education." The label is typically applied to novels that focus most of their attention on the moral and/or psychological growth of the main character throughout a span of time. The birth of the genre is typically said to be during the late 18th century with the publication of Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. The coming-of-age novel developed momentum in Germany during the 19th century, and the popularity of the genre quickly spread across Europe. One of the aims of this paper is to illustrate how novels within the Young Adult genre can be linked genealogically to classic novels written in historically rich genres of so-called "adult" fiction. In other words, I'd like to demonstrate how it would be interesting and worthwhile to think of the *Bildungsroman* genre as an ancestor of contemporary young adult coming-of-age novels.

deliberate his own position within his social context. These epistles also provide clarification about the pains and tribulations of achieving reconciliation between personal desire and social demand. Furthermore, a significant number of these letters are focused on the execution and development of the act of writing, and more important, how writing influences and shapes the world of the protagonist.

“You see things. You keep quiet about them. And you understand” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 37). These three sentences manage to encapsulate how Charlie—the protagonist from Chbosky’s celebrated novel—approaches his world. He is a wallflower: a passive participant in his environment who observes and learns from the people around him, yet who avoids becoming an active member of his community. To further emphasize the inactive role that Charlie assumes, he typically describes himself as a writer and as a reader, focusing on the development of internal thoughts and ideas while executing no direct action that affects the exterior world. Thus, Charlie’s attempts to adapt to his world, and to eventually understand it, are limited to the analytical capabilities of his awareness rather than on pragmatic experiences and interventions. He is a person of thought, not of action.

The novel traces the letters that Charlie writes to an anonymous and unidentified recipient throughout his first year in high school. In his first letter, Charlie writes that he changes the names of people he writes about, and soon after, the reader finds out that even the name “Charlie” is a pseudonym that he uses to protect his identity. Since his letters are written anonymously, and since Charlie makes it clear that the recipient of the letters does not know him, Charlie is quite candid and unrestricted with the content of his writing, discussing everything from rape, drug use, sexual abuse, and psychological trauma. Nevertheless, rather than simply narrating the account of a teenager trying to deal with these intense issues as he assimilates within the context of 1990s America, Charlie’s brutally honest letters manage to convey the story of an adolescent trying to evolve from a passive observer of life to an active participant. Throughout this attempt at transformation, the reader is immersed in the heartbreaking tale of a young boy who is attempting to create a metaphorical jigsaw puzzle without possessing all the necessary pieces.

Charlie constantly faces occurrences and issues

that force him to leave behind the ideologies and viewpoints that he held as a child. Between his first experiences with masturbation, his drug experimentation with marijuana and LSD, and the suicide of his close friend Michael,

Charlie definitely begins to realize that the world is not as innocent or easy as he initially thought it was. But rather than tackling external issues directly, he focuses on the internalization of his problems, turning to writing as a therapeutic way of soothing the tension between the pressures of the outside

world and his inability to cope with them. Charlie’s letters are extremely effective in invoking sympathy, depicting the events and people that he encounters with an astounding sense of realism, coated with the honesty and naiveté of a teenager who does not completely understand society or the people living in it. The letters are not peppered with the angst usually found in teenage prose, in which writers complain about the difficulties of life. Quite contrarily, Charlie avoids complaining even when he *clearly* has the right to do so. More than anything, the book as a whole offers a vivid and illustrative written record of the protagonist’s mind, leaving the readers, as the recipients of his letters, to assess the value and meaning of his words.

Charlie’s first epistle opens with his reasoning behind sending the letters: he heard that the recipient is a good listener, is capable of understanding the complexities of life, and more important, the recipient is in a position such that he/she cannot take advantage of the information depicted in the letters (Chbosky, 1999, p. 2). The reader of the novel is expected to assume the position of this recipient, and by engaging with the narrative, he/she is expected to listen, understand, and not jump into judgment. Much like a patient visiting a psychologist’s office, Charlie is expected to speak and the reader is expected to listen and assess his accounts. After the discussion of this reasoning, Charlie discusses the purpose of writing these letters:

I just need to know that someone out there listens and understands and doesn’t try to sleep with people even if

---

## quote

---

they could have. I need to know that these people exist. [. . .] So, this is my life. And I want you to know that I am both happy and sad and I'm still trying to figure out how that could be. (Chbosky, 1999, p. 2)

---

## quote

The passage above illustrates Charlie's overall aims for his writing: not only does he want to affirm that there are people in the world who are willing to understand him without taking advantage of the events he shares, but he is also writing in an attempt to understand who he is and what he desires. Nevertheless, by refusing to attach his real name in

any of his letters, and by refusing to divulge his fears and tensions to a person who actually knows him, he is further perpetuating the sense of detachment that characterizes him throughout the entire narrative.

It is precisely this sense of impartiality that provides Charlie with the opportunities to understand and evaluate his own growth and identity, but this sense of detachment also becomes a hurdle that he must overcome in order to trigger mental and social growth. Metaphorically speaking, the letters are the records of his various attempts to transform from a wallflower into a full-fledged rose. As Wasserman (2003) discusses in her intervention on the epistolary young adult novel:

Charlie's letters provide him with a space in which he can reflect and construct his own way of thinking, a space necessary for human development. It is in these letters where he confronts his particular demons. [. . .] the letters do not allow Charlie to repossess anything he has written because he cannot reclaim his words after they have been sent. (p. 50)

Charlie explicitly states that he mails the letters that he writes as soon as he can in order to assure that he cannot take back what is written, further cementing the sense of unrestricted candor prevalent within his prose. Although Chbosky's work is typically approached as an epistolary novel, Wasserman emphasizes that the letters function as a way for Charlie to construct the mental space needed for his development as a human being. However, does the fact that

the novel is written in an epistolary form prevent it in any way from being approached as a Bildungsroman?

## The Perks of the Bildungsroman Tradition

The element of mental development, formally known as *Bildung*, is looming within *Perks*. Yet, one must question whether or not the presence of this element allows one to approach the text as a Bildungsroman. After all, what novel that depicts teenage life does *not* depict a coming-of-age process to some extent? Can it be argued that *Perks* is a contemporary embodiment of the Bildungsroman genre, and if so, how is *Bildung* approached by it?

At first glance, *Perks* seems to be anything but a novel of formation, especially when compared to classical texts such as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-6/1989), Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (1830/2002), and Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860/1999). First and foremost, the epistolary structure of *Perks* is problematic because the protagonist makes deliberate choices about what to tell the reader or what to hold back, thus leading to the possibility of omitting moments that depict *Bildung* or social assimilation. Furthermore, this structure leads to the depiction of the narrative in fragmented and uneven pieces—a fresh take on the “series of steps” that protagonists follow in traditional Bildungsromane—that are characterized as ostensibly smooth and linear in terms of narration and the character's development. Whereas traditional Bildungsromane depict an individual's development from childhood into adulthood, the duration of *Perks* takes place within a one-year span.

Furthermore, the novel is typically approached by readers and critics as a young adult novel, a problematic genre of literature that inhabits the grey area between children's fiction and full-fledged “adult” literature. This leads to further apprehensions in terms of placing this book within the same category as the works created by “great” or canonical authors. The position of young adult literature within this categorical limbo could partially be attributed to the fact that different people have diverging conceptions of what *does* or *does not* constitute literary “quality.” As pointed out by Miller and Slifkin (2010):

Unlike librarians who considered literary merit based on prestige, grammar and writing style, English professors stressed the importance of layered texts that allowed for

various levels of interpretation [. . .]. The only level of consensus amongst these voices was that literary merit means that texts must be layered—including multiple narratives, themes, and levels of interpretation. (p. 7)

Unfortunately, many assume that young adult literature lacks an aesthetically pleasing style or layers of complexity simply because they are targeted primarily at teenagers. However, as argued by Soter and Connors (2009) in their discussion of the “literary” nature of young adult literature, there are many eminent young adult novels, such as Cormier’s *The Chocolate War* (1974), that demonstrate an exceptional prowess in terms of style and content that is up to par with many titles classified as canonical texts. This leads the authors to believe “that young adult literature has the kind of literary merit that canonical literature demonstrates” (p.66). As will be demonstrated later in this discussion, *Perks* definitely possesses characteristics that highlight its literary quality under most standards, for not only does it possess interesting features in terms of style, but it also presents complex and multifaceted themes that ultimately offer many venues for interpretation.

Despite the aforementioned discrepancies, approaching *Perks* as a Bildungsroman becomes an effective manner of facilitating a critical assessment of the developmental issues that this novel ultimately provides. The question, however, is whether or not the notion of the Bildungsroman is flexible enough to embrace this epistolary classic, or whether this embrace is impossible or ineffective. This question is difficult due to the formulaic harshness that is many times imposed upon the Bildungsroman label. A particularly illuminating instance of this rigidity can be seen in a response to David Miles’s interpretations of the Bildungsroman genre, in which Hirsch (1976) argues that the Bildungsroman’s defining characteristic is that it “maintains a peculiar balance between the social and the personal and explores their interaction” (p. 122). She goes on to contest Miles’s “loose and conflating” (p. 122) perspective of the Bildungsroman with other literary genres, such as the picaresque novel.

Miles (1974) claims that the difficulty with Hirsch’s views and rigidity is that she approaches the Bildungsroman as a stable and unchanging form, and that this view demonstrates her “general unwillingness to concede historical shifts in the development of the Bildungsroman [. . .] and its relation to other

branches of fiction” (p. 123). It is interesting to note that the claim that caused so much debate is present in Miles’s discussion, “The Picaro’s Journey to the Confessional: The Changing Image of the Hero in the German Bildungsroman,” which focuses on three different German novels to demonstrate that the *Bildung* process in the nineteenth century was no longer taking place as a formal or exterior educational process in an actual society. Miles argues that *Bildung* within the nineteenth century was now taking place within the protagonist’s mind. Miles points out that this historical shift in the Bildungsroman was inevitable due to the fact that novelists were trying to remain constant with the developments, perspectives, and values that were outstanding during the creation of their literary works:

---

## quote

---

. . . the novelist, in order to remain mimetically true to such an increasingly inner order of reality, had to create heroes with corresponding energies of sensibility, self-consciousness, and inwardness; to borrow Stendhal’s metaphor, the novelist no longer wandered down life’s road with his magic mirror, but returned to his cell, where he hung it directly above the writing desk, to catch every distortion of the world as mirrored first in his own consciousness. (p. 989)

What Miles demonstrates is that unlike many other genres of literature, the Bildungsroman seems to exhibit a striking degree of flexibility, which is sensitive to temporal and literary changes and to the motifs that are favored by readers as well. Additionally, the classification of a novel as a Bildungsroman can be quite difficult simply because the coming-of-age process can vary according to the ideologies of the author and those of the reader or literary critic. In other words, it is arguably difficult to pinpoint what *Bildung* is, seeing as the term adopts different shades of meaning and significance not only across genres, but also across cultures (see “Different Shades of Development” sidebar).

As exemplified in Hirsch’s and Miles’s arguments, the flexibility that exists in the established parameters for the Bildungsroman genre eventually leads to disagreements about what should and should not be

## Different Shades of Development

The processes of self-cultivation and self-formation can vary across cultures, times, genres, and authors. Ultimately, there is no recipe for the coming-of-age process, and the experience of personal growth is very subjective and idiosyncratic. Although it is virtually impossible to standardize coming-of-age processes, as teachers, we can use quality young adult novels that follow Bildungsroman conventions in order to help students develop an awareness of the cultural and social differences that exist when approaching the themes of growth and development in literature and society. Here is a short list of novels that are structurally similar to *Perks* in that they explore the notions of self-cultivation and development, albeit through different temporal, social, and cultural lenses:

- J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)—Considered by many to be the progenitor of the contemporary young adult novel, Salinger's work traces 17-year-old Holden Caulfield's brief escape from a boarding school during 1949. Throughout the development of the novel, Holden reflects upon the pains of growth and the loss of innocence in a fragmented society.
- S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967)—Although typically approached by scholars as a "problem novel," it can also be approached as a formation novel because it highlights the socioeconomic tensions that are involved with the notions of maturity and adulthood. Similar to *Perks*, the novel's narrator, Ponyboy, also resorts to the act of writing as a therapeutic tool for growth and cultivation.
- J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series (1997–2007)—The celebrated fantasy series, as a whole, definitely alludes to characteristics of the Bildungsroman, for it follows the growth and development of the eponymous character and his friends over a seven-year span. Throughout the series, we witness the evolution of characters in terms of their values, their morals, and even their relationships with non-magical cultures.
- Sue Monk Kid's *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002)—Set during the year of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, Kid's novel focuses on the moral, cultural, and civil development of Lily Melissa Owens as she tries to make sense of her past. Her journey is laced with loss and betrayal, and it even deals with charged complexities such as interracial relationships.
- Alex Sanchez's *The God Box* (2007)—Sanchez's novel tells the story of Paul, a Mexican American teenager who engages in a moral and spiritual journey to find conciliation between his religious beliefs, his ethnic background, and his sexual orientation.
- Nick Burd's *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* (2009)—Burd's novel, which takes place in the Midwest, traces Dale's journey of self-discovery through the process of coming-out. Although to some extent it follows similar tropes to other coming-out novels, Burd's gripping work is characterized by its depth of description and its believable characters.
- John Corey Whaley's *Where Things Come Back* (2011)—Taking place in the South, Whaley's novel, similar to *Perks*, focuses on the sentimental development of a male protagonist. The notions of family, brotherhood, and love are central themes that are intertwined with the main character's self-cultivation.

classified as a formation novel. Many scholars argue that there are countless novels that are categorized within this genre even though they do not comply with the formula or the stipulations that are deemed necessary for its categorical classification. As a matter of fact, even the novel that is usually designated as the prototypical Bildungsroman deviates from these stipulations, as pointed out by Krimmer (2004) in

her discussion of paternity and formation in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. She suggests that even though the text under discussion is considered to be the foundational text of the Bildungsroman genre, many scholars have argued that Wilhelm Meister shows no indications of maturity by the novel's conclusion. In other words, successful assimilation was not the goal of Goethe's novel, but rather, it was the

representation of the tragic outcome of a dreamer who collides with a harsh reality. *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* thus lacks one of the central characteristics that scholars typically deem to be crucial in the Bildungsroman genre, which in due course, highlights the possibility that the genre is not as rigid and unbending as many believe it to be.

However, the problem with the Bildungsroman being flexible and encompassing is that there exists the possibility of the label becoming too broad, and perhaps utterly meaningless. What then characterizes novels that we approach as fictions of development? Scholars such as Sammons (1991), in his attempt to clarify the definition of the formation novel, argue that in essence, a novel designated as a Bildungsroman should have an involvement with the concept of self-cultivation and the process of negotiating personal desire with the demands of society:

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 an accommodation with life and society or not. (p. 41)

Undoubtedly, *Perks* comes into contact with the concept of *Bildung*. Furthermore, it embraces many characteristics attributed to the Bildungsroman genre, such as an emphasis on the transition from an undeveloped to a mature mentality, the portrayal of said transition through a period of time, a focus on the protagonist as the central gravitational force of the novel's plot, the grounding of the plot in a specific historical time, an emphasis on the role of literature in personal formation, and the tribulations of social assimilation. Thus, rather than thinking of the Bildungsroman as a genre *per se*, the remainder of this discussion will approach the Bildungsroman as a *function* assigned to texts that depict and negotiate development in their content and structure. But, how does the Bildungsroman function manifest in *Perks*?

## The Links between Writing and Formation

Although *Perks* is certainly considered an epistolary novel in terms of its form and delivery, its content

and function are definitely attuned toward the aims of developmental fiction. Given that the protagonist depicts his own mental cultivation through his writing, and given that the novel is written via a series of letters, it is imperative that the reader become attuned to how the process of writing and the process of *Bildung* work together to fulfill and challenge the nuances of the formation novel. The process of writing in *Perks* manifests primarily in two ways: through the letters that Charlie writes to the anonymous recipient and through the assignments and tasks that he completes for his English class in high school. It is fascinating to observe how Charlie's writing is a strong reflection of his own development as a person; the writing that we encounter in the first letters of the book is more scrambled, disorganized, and "immature" when compared to the prose found in his final letters.

I offer an example of Charlie's writing at the beginning of the novel: "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" (Chbosky, 1999, p. 6). This sentence exemplifies the writing style that is predominant during the first letters of the novel: the prose is peppered with run-on sentences, he has not mastered the art of punctuation, and his ideas often lack coherence and cohesion. But we see that his writing style, and even the topics that he discusses in his letters, begin to evolve and mature as Charlie gains more experience with the art of writing, and as he begins to delve—with increasingly complicated effort—into understanding himself and the people around him. Charlie's English teacher, Bill, assumes the role of Charlie's mentor, not only from an educational standpoint, but also from a formational one. Charlie takes Bill's advice and suggestions quite seriously, and although Bill always gives Charlie an A on his report card, he always writes a lower grade on his essays as a way of challenging him:

---

### quote

---

## A Note on Theory and Its Application to Young Adult Literature

**W**hen writing this article, I constantly thought about the role of theory and literary criticism as applied to the realm of young adult fiction. Soter and Connors (2009) do an outstanding job of defending young adult literature's merits as literature proper, but in the context of classroom teaching. I personally consider *some* critical interventions of young adult fiction restrictive in that their discussion is usually tied to their pedagogical applications. This restriction, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. I deem the pedagogical applications of young adult fiction to be crucial in terms of fighting for the inclusion of young adult texts in academia, in the canon, and in the curriculum. However, if we want to demonstrate to the world that young adult literature *can* and *should* be approached as "Literature," we have to look beyond the scope of the classroom and demonstrate that it is interesting and productive to approach the genre using prominent critical, literary, and cultural theories.

I'm sure that my intervention of *Perks* using a critical and genre-based approach in conjunction with close readings might have seemed baffling and confusing to some of my readers, especially those who are new to theoretical applications of literature. I do not blame you for this: theory and criticism are difficult by nature, and even as a scholar in English literature, I find myself constantly struggling with many theories and literary approaches. This does not mean, however, that theory is not worthy of our time. As feminist scholar bell hooks (2013) posits in her discussion of theory as a liberatory practice: "By reinforcing the idea that there is a split between theory and practice or by creating such a split, both groups deny the power of liberatory education for critical consciousness, thereby perpetuating conditions that reinforce our collective exploitation and repression" (p. 41).

Although her views pertain to feminist criticism, I believe that they do shed some light on the status of young adult literature as an intermediary force between theory and practice. If we want to push young adult fiction beyond its repressed state in the curriculum and in academia, we have to embrace both practice (teaching) and theory (critical literary analysis). Only then will we be able to demonstrate how traditional literary concepts (such as the Bildungsroman function) can be stretched and used as a heuristic tool in discussions of young adult fiction. Simultaneously, we will be able to challenge the erroneous assumption that Bickmore (2008) once highlighted, in which teachers and scholars assume that "young adult (YA) literature simply isn't rich enough to compete with the entrenched works of the canon as quality literature" (p. 76).

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 to do that. He also said that I should use the vocabulary words that I learn in class like "corpulent" and "jaundice." I would use them here, but I really don't think they are appropriate in this format. (Chbosky, 1999, p. 14)

After Bill's recommendations, Charlie's letters increasingly avoid the use of run-on sentences, and his prose becomes much clearer and more efficient, saying more with fewer words. It is also interesting to note that when Charlie writes about the books that Bill assigns to him, he manages to use writing as a way of evaluating the actions of the characters as he tries to establish

parallels between his own life and the "life" portrayed in the books.

This notion of comparing and contrasting becomes important in terms of the content depicted in Charlie's letters, for it is in this instance that he begins to situate himself more prominently in the actions that are represented in the letters. At first, most of what he writes concerns his observations of his family. This notion of writing "empirical" observations of the people he observes becomes the main focus of Charlie's letters until Bill begins to notice that Charlie constantly stares at people and scrutinizes them obsessively. He then asks Charlie what he thinks about when he observes people. After Charlie tells Bill

everything he thinks about, the teacher remarks that although thinking a lot is not necessarily a bad thing, “sometimes people use thoughts to not participate in life” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 24). This remark pushes Charlie to further assess his own life and the degree to which he participates in events, talks with other people, and tries to make friends. However, the very process of writing down his thoughts obliges him to become introverted and pensive, and he continues to write letters as a way of assessing his own life: “[W]hen I write letters, I spend the next two days thinking about what I figured out in my letters. I do not know if this is good or bad” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 28). The effort that Charlie puts into trying to understand his meditations is a clear indicator that Bill was right to some extent. So much effort is invested trying to understand life that there is little room to actually live and enjoy it.

Despite the mental effort and time required in the crafting of his letters, there seems to be a radical shift in terms of the content being portrayed after Bill warns Charlie about the perils of overthinking. The focus of the letters shifts from family to Charlie’s efforts to socialize and make friends. In due course, Charlie becomes very close to some seniors at his school, though they are a relatively unpopular group. The first friend he makes in high school is Patrick, a gay senior with a penchant for jokes and mischief, who introduces Charlie into the world of drinking, smoking, and the unwritten rules of sexual behavior. He also befriends Sam (short for Samantha), who is Patrick’s stepsister and on whom Charlie develops an obsessive crush. The bulk of the letters depicted after this point discuss the differences that exist between Patrick, Samantha, other friends, and himself, and his strivings to understand the motivations behind their thoughts and actions. More important, the remaining letters depict the arduous process of becoming an active agent in society.

Charlie develops a clearer sense of the world through this difficult process of integration and through his immersion in new experiences such as drug use, masturbation, visits to the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and exposure to different literatures. His analysis of the content of his letters and the feedback he gets from his essays at school demonstrate that Charlie is developing the ability to make his writing more concrete and understandable because he

is undergoing experiences that provide him with a substantial analytical platform. In addition, Charlie’s development of his writing prowess leads him to the discovery of the craft he wants to hone as a professional endeavor: “I have decided that maybe I want to write when I grow up. I just don’t know what I would write” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 46). At first, letter writing—itsself an isolating endeavor—and his obsessive introspection prevent him from participating fully in his own life. However, when Charlie combines his writing skills with his recent experiences, he develops a richer image of who he is and who he wants to be. It is interesting to realize that the more Charlie writes, the more he understands himself, and the easier it is for the recipient of the letters to develop a more defined snapshot of Charlie’s mind. In other words, the more Charlie begins to understand himself, the more others also begin to understand him.

It is unclear whether Charlie keeps copies of the letters for himself; however, he consistently makes reference to past epistles. Charlie compares and contrasts experiences illustrated in his letters, and he also revisits previous points of discussion in order to reevaluate his thoughts using the knowledge that his experiences have thrust upon him. For instance, Charlie once reads a poem to his friends titled, “A Person/ A Paper/ A Promise Remembered,” written by Patrick Comeaux (1999) and given to him by Michael (the friend who committed suicide). This poem portrays the growth of a boy into a man, and concludes with the speaker’s suicide due to his disillusionment with life. At first, Charlie is unable to understand the poem clearly, and he is unwilling to understand why a person would commit suicide. But, during New Year’s Eve, Charlie writes a letter in which he confesses that a particular experience has unfortunately helped him to grasp the intended 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

---

## quote

---

in my life, I understand the end of that poem. And I never wanted to. You have to believe me. (Chbosky, 1999, p. 96)

It is important to note that in this instance, Charlie is using writing for a new purpose: rather than using the letters as a means of interpreting himself and his world, he uses writing as a way of distancing him-

---

### quote

self from his thoughts, as if writing were a way of draining his worries away from his mind. Even more poignant, by looking back at his own writing, he is able to comprehend how he loses innocence and how he is able to understand concepts that used to escape his cognizance. It is after this point that Charlie becomes a “rebel” in many aspects: he begins to smoke

and drink more than ever; he begins to explore his sexual identity by hanging out more often with Patrick and kissing him every so often, and he secretly offers his sister assistance when she believes she is pregnant.

Charlie begins to realize that life does not have to be lived according to others’ expectations, and if he is to achieve any degree of happiness, he has to find a way to balance his desires with social demand. This deviance from society’s parameters also manifests within Charlie’s writing, seeing as he begins to experiment with different styles of writing and of conveying ideas: “I wrote a paper about *Walden* for Bill, but this time I did it differently. I didn’t write a book report. I wrote a report pretending that I was by myself near a lake for two years. I pretended that I lived off the land and had insights. To tell you the truth, I kind of like the idea of doing that right now” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 128). Thus, rather than complying with a formula or a set of rules on how to tackle his literary interventions through writing, he delves into an experimental endeavor in which he filters the information he decodes in the book through his own set of experiences. Rather than simply being a sponge that absorbs and regurgitates ideas, Charlie begins to view the act of writing as a conversion taking place, turning him into an active writer rather than a passive one. Thus, the parallels between emotional and mental development, or

*Bildung*, become increasingly tied to the act of writing throughout the progression of the novel. Furthermore, notice that Charlie seems rather pleased about taking this new direction.

## A Blooming Wallflower

Charlie’s progression from a passive to an active participant is not an overnight change, but rather a very difficult and gradual process. Despite his attempts and small victories, Charlie still remains a wallflower in the later letters of the novel. However, in the climactic letter, Samantha confronts Charlie and obliges him to face the consequences of his lack of action. Sam has broken up with her boyfriend because he cheated on her, yet Charlie *never* makes an attempt to date her now that she is single. In a fit of frustration, Sam confronts Charlie with the truth after he confesses that he did not take action because he was more concerned with her sadness than with trying to be 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. (Chbosky, 1999, p. 200)

And rather than replying to her accusations with words, Charlie approaches Sam and starts to kiss her. They soon end up on the bed, kissing passionately, but just as they are about to go all the way, Charlie begins to have a nervous breakdown. To make a long story short, Charlie slowly but surely remembers the fact that he was sexually abused as a child by his deceased aunt Helen, which explains why he was so repressed and had difficulties participating in life. After a few months in the hospital after his breakdown, Charlie begins to come to grips with his repressed past, and he proposes to move on and change the direction of his life.

According to *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Buckley, 1974), a prominent motif within the Bildungsroman function 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” (p. 23). Indeed, the surprising and unprecedented moment in which Charlie reawakens his repressed past is heart-

## Writing as a Therapeutic Tool

As *Perks* effectively illustrates, writing can be a very effective therapeutic tool that can help students come to terms with the difficulties of adjusting to the norms and expectations of the “adult” world. Similar to the case of Charlie, I believe that writing helps students to define and develop their own identities. It is no coincidence that introspective teenagers are typically known for keeping journals or diaries to record their personal thoughts and in order to reflect on everyday occurrences. According to Feldman (2011) in her discussion of writing as therapy, although writing is primarily approached as a tool used for academic and communicative purposes, it also has the potential to help individuals to come to grips with personal problems, stress, and arguably, certain degrees of mental illness: “[W]riting draws attention to the sources of stress and the associated emotions by making sense out of life experience” (p. 94). With this in mind, it might prove useful to incorporate writing exercises in the classroom that push students toward self-discovery, contemplation, and self-reflection. Here are some suggestions for activities that can be used in conjunction with *Perks* to approach writing as therapy within the classroom context:

- While reading the novel, ask students to write a set series of letters (addressed to an anonymous recipient) in which they discuss problems or difficulties that they are currently facing, similar to what Charlie does in *Perks*.
- Ask students to create an online blog in which they discuss situations they have faced that resemble the experiences of the characters in the literary texts that are discussed in your class.
- After reading *Perks*, ask students to create an audio-narrative essay or a video blog in which they share and analyze a past experience that has shaped who they are.
- Ask students to keep a weekly diary or journal in which they record their thoughts and interpretations of the texts and assignments given in class. Toward the end of the semester, ask students to analyze their journal entries in order to write an analysis essay on how the texts and assignments have transformed their lives.

breaking and difficult to tolerate emotionally, but it is the moment in which Charlie truly begins to feel free from the unbearable burden of trying to figure out why he is the way he is, and why he so desperately craves to understand the world around him. And although action leads him to achieve his moment of breakthrough, it is the act of writing that helps him put his life into perspective and provides the missing puzzle pieces that complete the image of the self.

Charlie’s final letter, which is arguably his most powerful and emotionally charged piece, commences the conclusion of the novel by placing his past and his development *vis a vis* one another: “I guess we are who we are for a lot of reasons. And maybe we’ll never know most of them. But even if we don’t have the power to choose where we come from, we can still choose where we go from there” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 211). These words are perhaps the most resound-

ing ones to be found in this last letter, and arguably the entire novel, for it is at this moment that Charlie begins to come to grips with the fact that he has been molested as a child by his aunt.

Throughout the entire novel, Charlie’s unwillingness to be active in life and his desire to remain in the background as a passive observer were ostensibly fueled by this repressed childhood memory. Although he spends most of his time and effort trying to understand who he is and how people’s personalities are shaped, he finally comes to the realization that people are not bound to the past and that they eventually have the authority to break away from these binds. In other words, Charlie becomes conscious of the fact that although he is not directly responsible for the person he is, he has the power of *choice*, and the power to steer his life in another direction if he so desires. But the passage above does more than encapsulate a

lesson learned by Charlie; it indicates a *shift* within his perspectives—the way that he used to view the world no longer dictates the way he will view it from that moment forward.

This affirmation on behalf of the protagonist indicates that a negotiation has been achieved between social demand and personal desire, a negotiation that

---

**quote**

has led the character to a greater understanding of who he is and what he wants. In other words, the passage marks a moment in which Charlie develops an awareness of his own *Bildung* process. This once again is reminiscent of ideas posited by Buckley (1974), in which he argues that once the protagonist of the Bildungsroman reaches maturity, he will

feel the cultural and social restrictions that are often encountered though the process of growing and maturing. However, the protagonist's journey—whether successful or not—will lead him/her to realize that the freedoms that are lost could still be recovered to some extent.

Although action leads Charlie to have an epiphany, it is the act of writing that ultimately helps him come to terms with his life, his past, and his future; through the passive act of reflecting and inscribing his own story, he is able to develop a better understanding of his own identity. Going back to the first letter he penned, he finally figures out why he is both happy and sad, and more important, he realizes that there are indeed perks that go hand-in-hand with being a wallflower. He concludes his final letter by stating that he will stop sending letters, and that he hopes the recipient believes that everything will turn out alright for him.

Thus concludes a journey into maturity and an effort toward self-cultivation. Although the reader experiences the development of a human being, this development is depicted, deliberated, and assessed through the act of writing—a nod to the Bildungsroman's long-running association with self-reflection and metaliterary trickery. Although the novel is definitely epistolary in structure, its aims, or rather its

*function*, is to portray *Bildung*, though from a voice and a method that is not usually seen in canonical texts that can also be approached as fictions of development. But rather than simply embracing aspects of the Bildungsroman genre, the epistolary structure and role of writing letters in *Perks* actively serves as a transformational agent that extends the scope of possibility within coming-of-age fiction. This transformation becomes apparent when focusing on the fact that the reader of Chbosky's novel is put in the place of the recipient of Charlie's letters, who in turn occupies the place of the assumed "wiser" narrator that is so typical of traditional Bildungsroman prose. Given the fact that young adult literature implicitly always strives to educate the reader in some fashion—and keeping in mind the role of the reader as a recipient of Charlie's letters—the novel ultimately attempts to depict a formation process while deliberately taking advantage of the formative nature of the epistolary form. Just as Charlie is pushed to become an active participant in his cultural and social setting, the reader is encouraged to become an active participant in the narrative.

Charlie's mental development fuses with the development of the letters themselves, to the point that the character, his writing, and the reader ostensibly come of age. Although Charlie points out that he will most likely discontinue sending letters to the "unknown" recipient, this does not necessarily imply that his development has ceased. Rather, writing has gotten him to the point that he needed to reach: the harmonization of the self within a respective social context. Thus, his desire to stop writing letters is not a halt of the development process; rather, it is an indication that his original aims for writing have been fulfilled. The evolution of Charlie's writing mimicked and replicated his own mental and spiritual growth; he wrote through the process of growth, he grew through the process of writing. And through his writing, we develop as readers: we indeed become people who are not only capable of listening to Charlie, but are also capable of understanding him.

*Angel Daniel Matos is a doctoral student in English at the University of Notre Dame, where he also teaches a course on Multimedia Writing and Rhetoric. He is primarily interested in representations of social ostracism, race, gender, and growth in contemporary young adult fiction.*

## References

- Bickmore, S. T. (2008). It is inexcusable to deny *Inexcusable* a place in the classroom. *The ALAN Review*, 35(2), 75–83. Retrieved from <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/>.
- Buckley, J. H. (1974). *Season of youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Burd, N. (2009). *The vast fields of ordinary*. New York, NY: Dial Books.
- Chbosky, S. (1999). *The perks of being a wallflower*. New York, NY: MTV Pocket Books.
- Comeaux, P. (1999). A person/a paper/a promise remembered. In S. Chbosky, *The perks of being a wallflower* (70–73). New York, NY: MTV Pocket Books.
- Cormier, R. (1974). *The chocolate war*. New York, NY: Dell Laurel-Leaf.
- Dickens, C. (1860/1999). *Great expectations*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.
- Feldman, D. (2011). Beyond the classroom: Writing as therapy. *Journal of Poetry Therapy: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research, and Education*, 24(2), 93–104.
- Goethe, J. W. (1795-96/1989). *Wilhelm Meister's apprenticeship* (E.A. Blackall, Trans.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Golding, W. (1954/2003). *Lord of the flies*. New York, NY: Perigee Books.
- Hinton, S. E. (1967). *The outsiders*. New York, NY: The Penguin Group.
- Hirsch, M., & Miles, D. H. (1976). Defining Bildungsroman as a genre. *PMLA*, 91, 122–123. Retrieved from *JSTOR*.
- hooks, b. (2013). Theory as liberatory practice. In W. K. Kolmar & F. Bartkowski (Eds.), *Feminist theory: A reader* (pp. 37–42). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Kid, S. M. (2003). *The secret life of bees*. New York, NY: The Penguin Group.
- Krimmer, E. (2004). Mama's baby, papa's maybe: Paternity and *bildung* in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. *The German Quarterly*, 77, 257–277. Retrieved from *JSTOR*.
- Miles, D. H. (1974). The picaro's journey to the confessional: The changing image of the hero in the German Bildungsroman. *PMLA*, 89, 980–992. Retrieved from *JSTOR*.
- Miller, sj, & Slifkin, J. M. (2010). "Similar literary quality": Demystifying the AP English literature and composition open question. *The ALAN Review*, 37(2), 6–16. Retrieved from <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/>.
- Salinger, J. D. (1951). *The catcher in the rye*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.
- Sammons, J. L. (1991). The Bildungsroman for non-specialists: An attempt at a clarification. In J. N. Hardin (Ed.), *Reflection and action: Essays on the Bildungsroman* (pp. 26–45). Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Sanchez, A. (2007). *The God box*. New York, NY: Simon Pulse.
- Soter, A. O., & Connors, S. P. (2009). Beyond relevance to literary merit: Young adult literature as "literature." *The ALAN Review*, 37(1), 62–67. Retrieved from <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/>.
- Steinbeck, J. (1939/2002). *The grapes of wrath*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Stendhal. (1830/2002). *The red and the black* (R. Gard, Trans.). New York, NY: The Penguin Group.
- Wasserman, E. (2003). The epistolary in young adult literature. *The ALAN Review*, 30(3), 48–51. Retrieved from <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/>.
- Whaley, J. C. (2011). *Where things come back*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.