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### The Merits of Young Adult Literature: Examining the Mental States of the Protagonists in the Catcher in the Rye, the Outsiders, the Book Thief, and the Perks of Being a Wallflower

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The Merits of Young Adult Literature: Examining the Mental  
States of the Protagonists in *the Catcher in the Rye*, *the  
Outsiders*, *the Book Thief*, and *the Perks of Being a Wallflower*

by Tim Kelly

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Fall 2021

## Abstract

Young adult literature, a genre of literature made to appeal to adolescents, has been a success within its target demographic for decades. Because of its intended audience and resulting subject matter, there are many who are either dismissive or ignorant of the genre, seeing it as inherently below other genres in terms of complexity or simply never bothering to give it the time of day. However, this paper argues that it is this effort to relate to this intended audience and their lives, most notably from a mental perspective, that grants the genre depth that is equal to more traditional genres. Through analyzing the mental states of protagonists of *the Catcher in the Rye*, *the Outsiders*, *the Book Thief*, and *the Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and backing up these analyses with secondary sources, the complexity of thought that young adult literature is capable of through its nuanced portrayals of its themes and characters will be confirmed.

## Introduction

When someone thinks of the pieces of media that have the most impact on them, it is often the ones that engross them during their formative years. This can apply to any type of media, but books stand out as something that are sometimes considered unwanted and uninteresting by adolescents. Of course, this is a stereotype that is not always the case, but one must wonder how that stereotype came to be in the first place. In 'Text Complexity and Young Adult Literature', Marci Glaus notes that a fellow educator "suggested that the English teachers she works with across the United States and Canada believe that 20 percent or less of their students read assigned books." (407) While books read for school are certainly not always the

only books a teenager will read, it is the one place where a teenager will be guaranteed to at the very least be encouraged to read one. And what kind of books are they encouraged to read? The classic 'canonical' works, which, regardless of what one may think of their quality, tend to be relatively old and thus not directly related to whatever a teenager may be interested in, nor the issues a teenager may go through. Again, a gross generalization, but the point remains that many teenagers are simply uninterested in many of these books and, because of this, don't care to read in general. And that is where young adult literature comes in, a genre of literature created specifically for this age group.

But what exactly is young adult literature? It is a vague enough term that could be possibly encompass any book enjoyed by those of an adolescent age, but it is a bit more specific than that. Glaus, after choosing from an array of potential definitions, decides that the best is "texts in which teenagers are the main character dealing with issues in which teens can relate, outcomes usually depend on the decisions and choices of main characters, and oftentimes 'all traditional literary elements of classic literature' can be found." (408) The first two points make complete sense and make for a perfect definition all on their own, as texts explicitly made to relate to teens will clearly want a relatable character with agency that teenagers can relate to. However, it is the third that is most interesting and yet most disagreeable. Expecting any genre, let alone young adult literature, to 'oftentimes' include elements seen in canonical works is definitely limiting in what the genre is capable of. That is not to say that there aren't examples of the genre that do, but at the same time appealing to teenagers will not always coincide with applying elements of the classics they may read in school.

It is because of this that many don't see young adult literature as potentially equal to said classic works. "Many people have argued that YA literature, which is often grouped as a sub-division within the category of children's literature, isn't worth much attention because it doesn't offer enough substance to be included within the traditional literary canon." (Daniels, 78) Even the definition given above, accepted by a proponent of young adult literature, attempts to fit the genre within the mold of these classic works. It is a struggle that writers within the genre are quite aware of, with them often including protagonists who appreciate books and thus directly interact with canonical works within their own stories. "Thus, rather than viewing YA literature as either roadblock or gateway to the classics, as help or hindrance to education, it can be seen as a form of critical engagement with what concepts such as 'literary education' or 'canon' can, do, or should mean for young people..." (Hateley, 73) In that quote, Erica Hateley notes how concepts such as a literary canon are subjective, and that the manner in which young adult literature includes characters reading and discussing these works brings attention to the adolescent's ability to decide what they think about the literary canon themselves. It has even been suggested by educators that the genre raises the potential for readers to engage in other genres that they would otherwise never want to read. "By providing our young students with accessible and relevant texts, YA literature encourages students to read more and gives them the confidence that they can independently navigate complex texts." (Ostenson and Wadham, 11) While many consider the genre to be too inherently juvenile for it to work in the classroom or be reasonably comparable to canonical works, there is a growing number of educators who are seeing the potential merit of the genre.

But regardless of its complex relationship to education and canonical works, young adult literature wants to appeal to teenagers first and foremost, and on more than a superficial level. Because of this, the protagonists of these stories all have their mental state as an important component of the story, and these depictions rarely shy away from the complexities of the mind. It is this aspect that leads many to argue that the dismissive stance many take towards the fundamental literary merit of young adult literature is unfair. “We consequently argue... that young adult literature is not only about subjects and themes that are relevant to adolescent readers, but that its treatment of these subjects and themes reflects a level of sophistication that invites serious interrogation on that part of readers eager for a marriage of intellectual and affective engagement.” (Soter and Connors, 62) That very quote succinctly describes the purpose of this paper. The turbulent mental state of the teenager is one of the most notable aspects of growing up, as they contend with figuring out their place in the world around them, and, to reflect this, young adult protagonists tend to deal with varying amounts of mental health issues and trauma. It can be something relatively lowkey, like an inner alienation at the world around them, or something incredibly tragic, whether it be sexual assault or the deaths of those close to them. Whatever the case may be, these young adult protagonists constantly and deliberately deal with complex issues in ways just as nuanced as adult fiction, with the added caveat that they are not adults but adolescents that still are figuring out how the world works. This paper will examine four works and their protagonists in that mold: Holden Caulfield from *the Catcher in the Rye*, Ponyboy Curtis from *the Outsiders*, Charlie from *the Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and Liesel Meminger from *the Book Thief*. These

four books show us the unique merit of young adult literature in terms of how it relates to the mentality of real young adults.

J. D. Salinger's *the Catcher in the Rye* will be the first to be analyzed, as it is the first to be released chronologically and thus a nice baseline to establish how adolescent protagonists and their mental states are portrayed. While not always considered a traditional example of young adult literature, and not necessarily written with that demographic in mind, it still, as will be argued further, shows many of the hallmarks of the genre that still exist to this day and therefor has an undeniable influence on the other works both consciously and unconsciously. The protagonist, Holden, explicitly deals with the existential issues that come with growing up through adolescence, such as a growing alienation with the world and authority figures and a resulting loss of innocence. His socioeconomic status and education also play important roles, which relates to later works in more ways than one. There are also implicit and explicit examples of traumatic incidents that impact his way of thinking and mental state, bringing further complexity to the book. Furthermore, *Catcher's* common placement among the aforementioned 'canonical' works put it in a unique place in terms of traditionally accepted literary merit that the other works do not, which adds to the argument that the genre has merit with its mere presence alone. Still, the themes of alienation and reactions to trauma first found here will be further seen in various ways throughout the other works as well.

S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* is often considered the first 'true' example of young adult literature, where a work was deliberately written and advertised with young adults in mind. It is also the only one to be written by a young adult, with S. E. Hinton only being 16 when she wrote it. Because of this, all the messages and themes in the book are unquestionably directly

relevant to the adolescent experience, including shared ideas with *Catcher in the Rye*. These include the aforementioned alienation and loss of innocence, as well as further looks into the impact of class and education on one's formative years. However, *the Outsiders* has quite a different outlook than *Catcher* does regarding these ideas, revealing how the young adult literature genre, even when dealing with similar themes, can have a breadth of varying views on the experience of growing up. The protagonist, Ponyboy, has both similarities and differences to Holden that will be explored, such as his reactions to trauma and the authority figures in his life, as will the unique sensibilities that he brings to the table when it comes to his different life experiences.

Markus Zusak's *the Book Thief* differs in having an explicit focus on historical fiction, World War II Nazi Germany to be more specific, compared to the others that are set in relatively contemporary times to when they were written. It deals with many similar themes as the previous works, but it also expands the scope to include ideas relevant to history and the human experience as a whole. This also relates to another unique feature, which is how it is the only one to not be directly narrated by a young adult protagonist, instead being narrated by the omniscient anthropomorphization of Death itself, who allows itself to follow the actual protagonist, Liesel. While much of the focus will remain on young adult related issues, these resulting added themes will be explained to further show the potential for complexity in young adult literature. Liesel undoubtedly deals with the most trauma out of any of these characters due to the terrible part of history she is caught in the middle of, and this focus on trauma is perhaps more important here than it is in any of the other works. But it is between this trauma and strange style of narration that we also get many glimpses of commonplace adolescent



experiences that allow the book to be placed firmly within the young adult literature genre, further emphasizing the potential for variety.

Stephen Chbosky's *the Perks of Being a Wallflower* is the most contemporary work in terms of setting, and there for the one that most directly correlates to modern readers in terms of the experiences depicted even though it is still technically set in the early 1990s. However, timeless themes dating back to *Catcher in the Rye* once again appear regarding alienation and loss of innocence, showing how relevant these works can be regardless of when they were written. Still, *Perks* manages to be unique as well, with the protagonist, Charlie, differing in being a much more quiet and less opinionated character in comparison to the others. This allows the book to grapple with the anxieties of adolescent life in a much less assured manner that further emphasizes the uncertainty and confusion found when growing up, which, while a common theme between all of these works, is most prominent here. It is also the book that perhaps deals with the widest variety of problems any teen could reasonably expect to face in their formative years, from the mundane to the devastating, and has the most acute understanding of mental health issues out of all the works. The constant presence of all these different issues, some of which don't get any true resolutions, only furthers the uncertainty of dealing with them as a young adult.

The analyses of these books will be accompanied by a number of secondary scholarly sources to bolster the points being made and further place the works in the greater context of the genre of young adult literature as a whole. Marci Glaus' 'Text Complexity and Young Adult Literature', while dealing with what the title states, is, as shown earlier, most important in providing a common and agreed upon definition of young adult literature that can be used to

argue whether certain works fit into the genre. Cindy Lou Daniels' 'Literary Theory and Young Adult Literature: The Open Frontier in Critical Studies' will, as also seen earlier, be used to establish the more negative and dismissive views of young adult literature that many have in order to argue against it. Anna O. Soter and Sean P. Connors' 'Beyond Relevancy to Merit: Young Adult Literature as 'Literature'' discusses the general literary merit of the genre and provides a positive counterpoint to the negative view. Jonathan Ostenson and Rachel Wadham's 'Young Adult Literature and the Common Core: A Surprisingly Good Fit' further argues for its literary merit, more specifically in the context of use in the classroom as a part of the curriculum. Erica Hateley's 'Canon Fodder: Young Adult Literature as a Tool for Critiquing Canonicity' discusses how young adult protagonists engage with canonical works, more specifically canonical poetry, as well as how the young adult genre itself engages with the concept of a literary canon. Further sources will be used in the story analysis sections and will thus be briefly introduced at the beginning of each.

All of these stories and the sources supporting them deal with a great many themes relevant to young adult experiences. There are both physical and mental experiences to consider, but the internal styles of narration these books exhibit led the connecting factor to be the mental issues that adolescent face when growing up and learning more about the world they inhabit. Through using all these sources and analyzing the books, we will examine whether young adult literature deserves to be considered an equal to classic literature. The answer will be that young adult literature absolutely can equal other genres in terms of complexity with how it manages to connect with the mental states of its intended audience through two of the

main themes these work share in that regard, those being a growing sense of alienation at the world and authority and an inevitable loss of innocence.

### *The Catcher in the Rye*

When it comes to *the Catcher in the Rye*, multiple sources will be used to reinforce arguments. Samira Sasani and Parvaneh Javidnejat's 'A Discourse of the Alienated Youth in the American Culture: Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*' provides great analysis of Holden's characterization and role as an alienated youth that relates to real life alienated youths. With alienation being an important theme in all of these works, this will be referred to quite a bit in this section. Stefania Ciocia's "The World Loves an Underdog,' or the Continuing Appeal of the Adolescent Rebel Narrative: A Comparative Reading of *Vernon God Little*, *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Huckleberry Finn*' is another reading that notes Holden's role as a rebellious and alienated youth, but also emphasizes his importance and influence on the idea of young adult narrators, effectively establishing Holden's place in comparison to the other narrators. Maria Nikolajeva's 'Memory of the Present: Empathy and Identity in Young Adult Fiction' discusses how young adult literature depicts developing brains in terms of how empathy develops, a concept that is quite relevant to Holden's somewhat self-centered characterization as well as the characterizations of characters in the later books.

First, the obvious must be pointed out. J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is often considered to be one of the canonical works that teenagers often avoid in school. So, why include it as an important example of young adult literature's depiction of an adolescent's mental state, the first to be analyzed no less, when many don't even think of it as part of the

genre? When it comes to its placement, it is the first to be analyzed because it is chronologically the first to be published out of the works I have chosen, and therefore an interesting template to compare future works to. But when it comes to why it is included in the first place, this is because it not only fits many definitions of young adult literature, with Holden being a teenager who makes every decision that drives the story along himself, but it also shows that the genre is more encompassing and well-regarded by those who might otherwise disregard it than might be initially assumed. In fact, Holden is often seen as an important and classic literary figure regarding representing the adolescent experience. "*Catcher* is crystalized in our collective imagination first and foremost as the epitome of the (middle-class) adolescent, disenchanting with societal conventions and values, but also prey to emotional turmoil that characterizes the transition from childhood to adulthood." (Ciocia, 200) Furthermore, when it comes to the mental health aspect, Holden's mental state, which includes past traumatic experiences both implicit and explicit, is what drives the entire book. It uses a stream of consciousness style of narration that puts the reader into his headspace in a very uncompromising way, allowing the reader to make their own judgments. The other stories have elements of this too, but, out of all the protagonists, Holden's mental state and resulting worldview is the most consistently central to his story. Finally, Holden's character is particularly defined by what differentiates a child from a young adult, which is important in showing what differentiates young adult literature from the children's literature that is often grouped with it.

Holden's mentality is centered around feeling alienated from the world surrounding him. This is a common aspect of young adult protagonists, as adolescence is when the individual begins to see the world in a more complex way and thus typically become more

critical of it as a result. "He is the emblem of a teenager getting out of the control of the family and gradually facing the adversaries of the outside world." (Sasani and Javidnejat, 205-206) Still, Holden's alienation is intense even by these standards, as the very first lines of the book are outright hostile to the reader for wanting to know anything about him. "If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap," (Salinger, 3) This sets an important precedent for the rest of book, letting the reader know right off the bat what kind narrator Holden is going to be. Still, despite his bluster, there is one important thing in that quote Holden does eventually talk about, if only for brief intervals, namely the 'lousy childhood'. What little we do get of his childhood is the death of his beloved brother, Allie, and how devastated he was a result. He still thinks of Allie a lot, even utilizing him to cope with his issues. "Boy, I felt miserable. I felt so depressed, you can't imagine. What I did, I started talking, sort of out loud, to Allie. I do that sometimes when I get very depressed." (129) In some ways, Allie represents the childhood that Holden has left behind, an idealized childhood where he only thinks positive thoughts and where he holds on to a sense of innocence and wonder that he feels is quickly slipping away. Holden is no longer a child, as the events of the book make perfectly clear, but a young adult who is just starting to make his way in world that he sees in a rather consistently negative light.

The source of Holden's negative view of the world is both from the loss of his innocence and the inevitable loss of innocence that everyone will face. Now that he no longer holds his own innocence, Holden instead decides he wants to protect it. He is the titular 'catcher in the rye', metaphorically catching children in a rye field who run too close to a cliff. This, he realizes

by the end, is an impossible dream. The impossibility of such a task is exemplified when he visits a museum he went to as a child and tries to scrub off graffiti of curse words. "This place has always been Holden's favorite place where he would feel stability and the state of nothing-is going to change. But... he sees those swear words on the walls and swears to God that there would be no single place in the whole world not being marked by those words" (Sasani and Javidnejat, 207-208) While most adolescents in real life have little problem with curse words, Holden himself curses in his narration quite a bit, it is more so the location and what it represents that bothers him. Even what he used to enjoy is seemingly being stripped away from him, and, to add insult to injury, the innocence he wishes he still had was now potentially being stripped away from other children. In the end, all of this, his brother's death and the resulting loss of innocence, is at the core of Holden's mental state and resulting alienation from the world. Loss of innocence, no matter the reason, is a universal experience that any adolescent will face or has already faced, and Holden, despite his abrasiveness and oftentimes unlikable personality, faces this issue in a surprisingly pure and sincere way. He wants to hold on to the innocence and protect others that still have it, but the lesson he and all young adults must face is that growing up is inevitable.

Holden's relationship with his sister, Phoebe, is the epitome of this relationship he has with innocence, and also provides hope that Holden will learn to grow as a person. Phoebe is the one character that Holden, besides Allie, that Holden almost unambiguously describes in a positive manner. While she appears a couple of times in the book, it is perhaps her appearance at the very end that has the most resonance when Holden takes her to a carousel ride in the park. The simple sight of her enjoying herself on the ride makes Holden happier than anything

else in the book. "I felt so damn happy all of a sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going around and around. I was damn near bawling. I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth. I don't know why. It was just that she looked so damn *nice*, the way she kept going around and around, in her blue coat and all. God, I wish you could've been there." (Salinger, 275) Of course, this relates to Holden's relationship with innocence, but what is notable here is that he expresses pure happiness in a way that he rarely does, not tempered by his cynicism or alienation. Instead, he appreciates the innocence Phoebe holds on to in an almost equally innocent way. There are only two more pages of the book after this, which only heightens the significance of the moment. Whether it is a moment of change is deliberately made ambiguous in those last few pages, as Holden declares that he does not know what to think of all the events he just recounted. "If you want to know the truth, I don't *know* what I think about it. I'm sorry I told so many people about it. About all I know it, I sort of *miss* everybody I told about... It's funny. Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody." (276-277) These final words imply that Holden has indeed begun to change and look on things more positively, even though he tempers that with a somewhat dismissive tone. Whatever the case may be, it is notable that Holden's relationship with innocence and alienation ends on such an open note perhaps as a sign of his growing maturity.

Besides this focus on lost innocence, Holden's entire character, flaws and all, is representative of the average adolescent. He exemplifies an important part of adolescence with his alienated musings and ruminations on the nature of innocence, but the question remains is if he as a character is relatable to young adult readers at all. Disregarding the traumatic incidents from his past, Holden's life as we see it is still relatively mundane. From a well-off

family, he is shown to spend money liberally and most of the book is simply him conversing with different people he meets. Even perhaps the most intense moments of the book, where he is assaulted and robbed by a pimp for refusing to pay a prostitute more money after he decided to not have sex with her, is born from a common teenage desire to lose virginity gone awry. Even his reactions to this moment confirm he's just a teenager in over his head. "All of a sudden I started to cry. I'd give anything if I hadn't, but I did. 'No, you're no crooks,' I said. 'You're just stealing five-' 'Shut up,' old Maurice said, and gave me a shove." (134) This is emblematic of Holden's more external issues. His struggles against expectations from school and the resulting tanked grades, his contentious relations with his roommates, his awkward attempts to find relationships with the opposite sex, these are mundane issues that any teenager could potentially deal with and thus so does Holden. The mistakes he makes and the often-self-centered view all of these experiences are filtered through are also representative of the average adolescent from a brain development standpoint. "Adolescents' deviant behavior is the consequence of the social brain's development. Strong emotions override adolescents' ability to take other people's perspectives. Actions such as planning, decision-making, and synthesis of information are still underdeveloped in the adolescent brain." (Nikolajeva, 86-87) Even if they don't have a dead brother or don't get into an altercation with a pimp, even if one finds Holden whiny and unlikable, the lowkey nature of the book allows us to potentially see ourselves in him whether we like it or not.

There are also aspects of Holden's character and mental state that are only implied rather than outright stated, such as a potential history with abuse. While so far there have been discussion of what is explicitly within the book, but there are hints of more aspects to Holden



that are never fully explained. Near the end of the book, when Holden is staying at an old teacher's house, he wakes up in the middle of the night to find said teacher, Mr. Antolini, petting his hair in his sleep. His immediate reaction is quite interesting. "I have to go anyway,' I said- boy, was I nervous! I started putting on my damn pants in the dark. I could hardly get them on I was so damn nervous. I know more damn perverts, at schools and all, than anybody you ever met, and they're always being pervy when I'm around." (249) This passage seems to imply Holden may have been sexually assaulted in his past, which may also account for why he ended up refusing to have sex with the prostitute. It is important to note, though, that this is never explicitly made clear, and even Mr. Antolini's strange actions are ambiguous in whether he's being drunkenly affection in a paternal or sexual manner. The hints are certainly there, though, with Holden's immediate nervousness and disgust with someone he had thus far been quite comfortable around being quite striking in comparison to how he normally acts. Along with the death of his brother, this potential trauma from his past could play a part in explaining the cynical and judgmental inner monologues that make up much of the book. Whether that was the intention or not, it adds another layer to his character the reader likely hadn't seen coming, a character aspect that will be discussed much more openly later within another work.

Analyzing Holden's mentality and the various aspects that go into making it what it is shows what a gross misjudgment it is to place young adult literature in the same category as children's literature and the inherent uniqueness a young adult narrator can give a story. There is much depth to the teenage experience that Holden taps into, most notably in his jaded and alienated views. "Alienation has always existed as a term, but *The Catcher in the Rye* has assisted its readers to realize the existence of the notion deep down in possibly every single one

of us.” (Sasani and Javidnejat, 210) Holden is no great hero or important figure; he is simply one of a countless number of teenagers trying to make sense of the world and finding great difficulty in doing so. Even if his cynicism can be extreme, even if his whininess can get on one’s nerves, his sense of alienation is one that naturally breeds relatability. Of course, a possible counter argument would be that, due to its typical canonical status, the novel is just on a level of its own, never matched by any ‘true’ young adult literature. While the matter of the quality of any of these books is a matter of opinion, these further young adult protagonists will unquestionably show that the complexity of adolescence is not kept to any one story but rather an entire genre.

### *The Outsiders*

*The Outsiders* has mostly sources that relate to its importance in young adult literature history as well as its themes on class disparity and education. Eric L. Tribunella’s ‘Institutionalizing *The Outsiders*: YA Literature, Social Class, and the American Faith in Education’ provides context on *the Outsiders*’ place in the history of young adult literature and also provides critical analysis on how it depicts themes of class and education. The books focus on class disparity makes Michael Pearlman’s ‘The Role of Socioeconomic Status in Adolescent Literature’ quite relevant, as it dissects how such themes on class impact the stories that focus on them. Michael Cart’s *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism* is, unlike the other sources, a full book that discusses young adult literature as well as different viewpoints on it and its history. It further connects *the Outsiders* to young adult literature, and also provides a wealth of information on how the genre grew over time through the years.

S. E. Hinton's *the Outsiders* has an interesting place in this paper for multiple reasons. For one, it is the only of these works written by a young adult, Hinton being 16 when she wrote it. Also, it is often credited as being the originator of the modern-day young adult literature genre as we know it. Meaning that, while there were certainly earlier books that starred and were enjoyed by young adults, the idea of creating and marketing a book specifically to that age group started here. Even if that is not actually the case, it is still apparent that *the Outsiders* was influential on the genre. "From their inception, the teenager and teen culture were inextricably linked to the economy and social class, and so it is perhaps fitting that the 1967 publication of Hinton's *the Outsiders*, with its depictions of class conflict and violence in the lives of a small group of urban teenagers, has come to be seen as marking the maturity of YA literature." (Tribunella, 88) As the quote says, it was notable for its, for the time, stark depiction of class differences, violence, and death. All of this is seen through the eyes of Ponyboy Curtis, a young member of a gang of 'greasers' who are often in conflict with the upper class 'socials', or 'Socs'.

Ponyboy's sense of alienation is the result of both low socioeconomic status and traumatic incidents from his past. Much like *the Catcher in the Rye*, the story is told in a first-person narration that invites us to examine the mental state of the narrator. In comparison to Holden, Ponyboy is not as consistently angry and jaded at the world, and decidedly not well off. That does not mean he is not prone to anger or jaded thoughts at all, and indeed many examples of him exhibiting these tend to come back to his poverty and all the problems that causes for him. "*The Outsiders* places great emphasis on SES (socioeconomic status) and continuously draws a positive correlation between SES and self-esteem level." (Pearlman, 226) This is further compounded by the fact that his parents are both dead, leaving his oldest

brother, Darry, to care for him and his other brother, Sodapop. Because of this, Darry is forced to become the authority figure in the house and, knowing Ponyboy has potential in school, can at times be hard on him to encourage him, something Ponyboy resents. Ponyboy's resentment is also displayed towards the Socs, as he and all the other greasers are all too aware that, unlike them, the Socs are all able to return to their comfortable homes regardless of what happens during their conflicts. "Sodapop... a dropout so he could get a job and keep me in school, and Darry, getting old before his time trying to run a family and hang on to two jobs and never having any fun- while the Socs had so much spare time and money that they jumped us and each other for kick, had beer blasts and river-bottom parties because they didn't know what else to do." (Hinton, 40) As such, there is still a palpable alienation at the world present within Ponyboy that comes from his social class as much as it does the unique situation his family has found itself in after the premature deaths of their parents.

Ponyboy's dealings with trauma are intensified over the course of the story due to the deaths of two of his fellow greasers, Johnny and Dally. Johnny was Ponyboy's closest friend in the greasers, and it is his death that also leads to Dally effectively committing suicide by pointing an unloaded gun at some cops. It is during and after these events that Ponyboy's narration, and thus mental state, turn darkest, and this is reflected in his sickly physical state as well. Amidst his forced bedrest, Ponyboy attempts to block the memories of his friends from even being acknowledged. "Don't remember how Johnny was your buddy, don't remember that he didn't want to die. Don't think of Dally breaking up in the hospital, crumpling under the street light." (136) In fact, when he talks to Sodapop after he wakes up, the first worry he mentions is about how much school he is missing, and later he grouses about not being able to

go to an important track meet. These more regular teenage anxieties that he expresses outwardly are contrasted with his inner turmoil over the traumatic experiences he just bore witness to. This emphasizes not only the contrasts between these worries, but also how they are in a sense linked together. While Ponyboy is clearly in denial for this portion of the story, his education and book smarts, as encouraged by the parental figure of Darry, are still an important aspect of him that sets him apart from the other greasers. Even when time has passed after the traumatic events, Ponyboy is still an adolescent who has a hard time processing what he went through and thus defaults to the worries that he is much more used to. With this, Ponyboy deals with grief and trauma in a way befitting of his age group.

Through the aftermath of those events, *the Outsiders* demonstrates its views on innocence, views that are much more explicitly positive than *the Catcher in the Rye*. Despite all of the trauma he faces, Ponyboy ends the story with a relatively hopeful view of the future due to him taking Johnny's last words, "Stay gold," to heart. As Johnny writes in a posthumous letter, "I've been thinking about it, and that poem, that guy that wrote it, he meant you're gold when you're a kid, like green. When you're a kid everything's new, dawn. It's just when you get used to everything that it's day. That's gold. Keep that way, it's a good way to be." (154) The poem he refers to is 'Nothing Gold Can Stay' by Robert Frost, which Ponyboy recited to Johnny once in a show of his love for literature. All that truly matters about this poem in the context of *the Outsiders* is how Johnny interprets it, and, as the quote says, he sees it as a call to hold on to childlike innocence. Once more the loss of innocence caused by the transition to adulthood becomes a focal point for a character and their mental state, but this time a different conclusion is reached. According to Johnny, even if losing innocence is inevitable, it is still a

useful thing to be able to hold on to even a fraction of that childlike wonder regardless of what happens to you. It is through this method that Ponyboy manages to, at the very least, make peace with what he has been through and grow from it. In comparison to *Catcher*, this is much more romantic and unambiguously positive view of losing innocence. "Another element of romanticism is Hinton's sometimes sentimental treatment of her theme of lost innocence that may, in turn, invite some revisionist comparisons to Barrie's *Peter Pan* and his band of lost boys." (Cart, 30) Whether this advice is too naïve or romantic is up to the individual reader, but in the context of the story it does not feel that way. Losing innocence is inevitable, but *the Outsiders* posits that one can still manage to find moments of childlike wonder anyway, much like Holden watching his sister on the carousel. Regardless, these two differing views show that young adult literature is not without variety when it comes to depicting its themes.

This more idealistic view is reflected in Ponyboy, who manages to empathize more with Socs such as Cherry Valance and Randy over the course of the story. He, even with all the trauma he faces and the less-than-ideal position in life he finds himself, never fully succumbs to the levels of cynicism that Holden does. When Cherry Valance, an upper-class girl, tells him that Socs, despite their wealth, still have their own problems, he decides to believe her. They note that, despite their positions in life, they still see the same sunset. "It seemed funny to me that the sunset she saw from her patio and the one I saw from the back steps was the same one. Maybe the two different worlds we lived in weren't so different." (38) The resentment towards the Socs doesn't just disappear after this, but he makes an effort multiple times through the book to see from the point of view of Socs and realizes that they are not simply a monstrous 'other' but human beings like him. A member of the Socs, Randy, makes a similar empathetic

assessment of the greasers in turn, going out of his way to talk to Ponyboy. "I didn't know that.' Randy looked worried, he really did. A Soc, even, worried because some kid greaser was on his way to a foster home or something That was really funny. I don't mean funny. You know what I mean." (143) While the undeniable class disparity between the two groups is never given a neat resolution, and the book ends with both groups still inherently at odds because of said disparity, it is still notable that Ponyboy manages to, in part, overcome this resentment himself and that this is mirrored with Randy.

This overcoming of his resentment and alienation is also present in his relationship with his brother Darry. At the start, Ponyboy is convinced that Darry hates him because of how often he is scolded and how cold he can be. As mentioned, Darry is the parental authority figure in the house, and his initial authoritarianism is contrasted by the fact that he is still part of a gang of greasers who typically thumb their nose at traditional authority figures such as the police. This is further compounded by all the other greasers speaking up for Darry whenever Ponyboy lets his grievances known, noting that Darry must be this way now that he must take care of his brothers if he wants the family to stick together. Ponyboy usually blows these explanations off and allows his resentment of Darry to fester. The death of their parents is a major part of this, as is the anti-authority actions often committed by the greasers. This comes to a head when Ponyboy, after coming home late, is slapped by Darry in the heat of the moment. "Suddenly it was deathly quiet. We all had frozen. Nobody in my family had ever hit me. Nobody. Darry looked at the palm of his hand where it had turned red and then looked back at me. His eyes were huge." (46) This slap is an important focal point in the book for a couple of reasons, one being that it kicks off a major plot thread as Ponyboy runs away with Johnny as a result, and the

other being that it is where the conflict between Darry and Ponyboy reaches its height. While away from home, Ponyboy quickly realizes how much he misses it and how he takes all that Darry has done for him for granted. By the time the two of them reunite, there is no hostility to be found and only a mutual concern. In the end, Ponyboy realizes how to empathize with Darry's position and once again overcomes his resentment and alienation.

The resentment of authority found Ponyboy's interactions with Darry is also shown in the other greasers. While Ponyboy's deceased parents are mentioned as being loving, and his relationship with Darry is healed, the other greasers, that we know of, are not so lucky. Johnny and Dally both mention how their parents are abusive, both emotionally and physically, and Johnny even refuses to let his mom see him in the hospital. "I said I don't want to see her.' His voice was rising. 'She's probably come to tell me about all the trouble I'm causing her and about how glad her and the old man'll be when I'm dead. Well, tell her to leave me alone. For once' -his voice broke- 'for once just to leave me alone.'" (107-108) It is no wonder that these parental situations, or lack thereof, lead to the greasers to form their own gang as a family of sorts. The resulting violent gang wars with the Socs and the petty crimes such as theft that they commit come from an inner anger that is kindled not only by their socioeconomic status, but also their lack of home lives and resulting lack of respect for authority. This is an aspect that is not directly discussed as much as their socioeconomic status, but it is a very important aspect to the greasers all the same.

*The Outsiders* is not a book that is subtle with its messages, letting us know through Ponyboy's thoughts to 'stay gold', to hang on to some element of our innocence no matter what we go through. It is a thematic opposite to *Catcher in the Rye* in this way, but this only



goes to show that varying ways of thought are found within young adult literature. While it is the most overtly romanticized story in this essay, it is notable in making an effort to depict the harsh realities of teenage life at the time. "Hinton's great success came from managing to bridge that gap and, by giving fictional counterparts to real teenagers she knew, introducing to young adult fictions new kinds of 'real' character- whether they were alienated, socioeconomically disadvantaged greasers of the equally alienated... Socials." (Cart, 29) Neither the greasers nor the Socs come across as the caricatures they easily could have become, often having casual, mundane conversations and messing around like regular teenagers. Through this lens, the common themes of alienation and innocence are directly addressed by a teenage writer who knew they were important to her peers and thus strived to represent them as accurately as she could.

### *The Book Thief*

*The Book Thief*, being as complex and historically focused as it is, has the greatest number of sources dedicated specifically to it, though some of these sources have purpose to the greater paper beyond just analyzing the story. For instance, Talia E. Crockett's 'The Silence of Fragmentation: Ethical Representations of Trauma Young Adult Holocaust Literature' details the concept of 'fragmentation', where traumatic incidents are never fully shown or gradually revealed to be respectful of these incidents while still emphasizing the horror with the notion that less is more. This concept appears in all of these works, though the source applies its use to the Holocaust much as *the Book Thief* does. Manli Peng and Yan Hua's 'Who has Stolen Their Childhood?- A Comparative Study Between *The Book Thief* and *Grave of the Fireflies* from

Perspective of Trauma Narratives' provides a more specific look at how *the Book Thief* itself portrays Liesel's trauma and mental state. Deborah Almeida de Oliveira and Sandra Sirangelo Maggio's 'The Deadly Perception of the Witness: Focalization in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*' analyzes its unique narration style, and how it depicts the perceptions of different characters adds meaning and atmosphere that wouldn't be there otherwise.

Markus Zusak's *the Book Thief* is a truly unique example of young adult literature, especially in comparison to the other works featured in this paper. It is historical fiction, set in Nazi Germany amid World War II, and features all the resulting horrors that period implies. While the other works certainly reflect the time period in which they were written, this is the only one to explicitly be about a specific time in the past, and this has much impact on the mental state of its adolescent protagonist, Liesel Meminger. Liesel brings up another point that makes this book unique, which is that of the narrator. Unlike the other works, Liesel is technically not the narrator, with that distinction going to a personification of Death itself who is partly reading words that Liesel wrote herself and partly adding its own thoughts. However, Death is an omniscient being and as a result we are still allowed access into Liesel's mind by proxy. This omniscience is not limited to following Liesel though, as we are acquainted with a multitude of characters through Death, with Liesel and her experiences always remaining at the center of it all as the writer of the titular book Death took a liking to. "Here it is. One of a handful. *The Book Thief*. If you feel like it, come with me. I will tell you a story. I'll show you something." (Zusak, 14) These are not the only qualities in which the book is unique, but they are the most important to establish as they greatly inform all analysis.

Liesel is a character who experiences a lot of trauma that affects her mental state throughout the story, and much of it is depicted with a concept known as 'fragmentation'. In fact, she is introduced in the same scene in which her brother dies. Unlike some of the other protagonists, who have their traumatic pasts either implied or hidden for part of the story due to certain characters not wanting to acknowledge them, some of Liesel's most traumatic moments are laid bare from the very beginning. Having Death as the omniscient narrator allows Zusak to not only play with point-of-view, but time as well. While most of the book is in chronological order, the short prologue chapters show three points where characters around Liesel die from the beginning, middle, and end. One of the climactic moments of the book, when Liesel's home of Himmel Street is bombed resulting in the deaths of almost all her loved ones, is spoiled at the very beginning. "I was just about to leave when I found her kneeling there. A mountain range of rubble was written, designed, erected around her. She was clutching at a book." (12) However, while these traumatic events are not shielded away from, the fact that it's being narrated by a figure such as Death gives the descriptions an almost detached and surreal tone. "Curiosity got the better of me, and I resigned myself to stay as long as my schedule allowed, and I watched. Twenty-three minutes later, when the train was stopped, I climbed out with them. A small soul was in my arms." (8) Much like how certain works deliberately keep traumatic events ambiguous, this work depicts them in a unique matter that gets the harrowing point across without dwelling on realistic descriptions of the horror. This act of leaving certain things unsaid to actually amplify its importance is known as 'fragmentation'. "Fragmentation can allow authors to speak with the voice of silence, and leave unsaid that which cannot be depicted or understood." (Crockett, 4) The vast majority of people today

cannot understand what it was like to face the hardships within Nazi Germany, and so instead it is elected to show these events in a way that calls attention to that while still making the traumatic event clear through implication. However, this does not mean that Liesel's story is one that is impossible to relate to, just that specific moments of trauma are portrayed with a literary technique that is relatively common within young adult literature. Due to its specific historical perspective, Liesel's harsh journey to maturation is one that's tone is established perhaps before the book is even picked up by the reader, but these focalized chapters quickly let anyone unaware know what type of book this will be.

Liesel does not only have trauma in her life and forms many important relationships while living a relatively mundane life that makes up a good portion of the book, including her best friend, Rudy, and her foster parents, Hans and Rosa Hubermann. In fact, some of these characters are ones that Death allows us to follow at certain points in the story. "The only characters who receive such attention in *The Book Thief* are her foster father Hans, her Jewish friend Max and her best friend Rudy, although not to the same deep degree as Liesel's." (de Oliveira and Maggio, 136) There are chapters dedicated to the relationships they have, with Liesel playing with other kids in the streets and dealing with school assignments much like any other growing adolescent her age. She also grows close to Hans as he teaches her how to read and write, which are skills that, as the title lets us know, will become very important to her character. In fact, Hans becomes her first source of comfort after the death of her brother and subsequent placement in the foster care system. "'You stink,' Mama would say to Hans. 'Like cigarettes and kerosene.' Sitting in the water, she imagined the smell of it, mapped out on her papa's clothes. More than anything, it was the smell of friendship, and she could find it on

herself too. Liesel loved that smell.” (Zusak, 72) Part of the book is Liesel simply living her life, with her friendship with Rudy and the childish games they play. “Insane or not, Rudy was always destined to be Liesel’s best friend. A snowball in the face is surely the perfect beginning to a lasting friendship.” (48) However, the continuing encroachment of the Nazi party in her town provides more and more conflict as she grows older, and events start to intensify.

Another significant relationship that aids in Liesel’s development and coming to terms with her trauma is that of a Jewish man who hides out in the Hubermann’s house named Max. The conflict regarding the Nazi party reaches a turning point when Max enters the story, as this obviously creates another layer of tension that was not there before. But this does not matter much to Liesel, who quickly befriends Mx. As mentioned, Liesel’s brother dies at the very beginning of the story, and it is Max who becomes a brother figure of sorts to her. They share a love of reading and writing, and continually support each other’s efforts to engage in their skills. They both have constant nightmares brought on by traumatic events from their pasts, and they both arrive at the Hubermann household under tragic circumstances. He also leaves under tragic circumstances, forcing himself to leave once the Hubermanns start receiving Nazi attention. As a result, he ends up in a concentration camp. Liesel, watching him and the rest of the camp being marched through town, defiantly marches alongside him. But he manages to survive, and, after Liesel loses everyone in the bombing, it is Max who eventually returns to provide Liesel with a family member she desperately needs. “Liesel came out. They hugged and cried and fell to the floor.” (548) As all these examples show, Max is an integral character when it comes to Liesel’s mental state as he aids in her development. Her increasingly defiant nature

against authority, her attempts to come to terms with her issues, her love of reading and writing, it all is helped significantly by Max.

Despite the unique point in history Liesel finds herself in, she remains an example of a relatable young adult protagonist through the more mundane portions of her life. This was touched on earlier with her relationship with Rudy, which is a constant throughout the book until his death at the end. Most chapters that feature Rudy and Liesel hanging out are about adolescents that attempt to understand the strange world around them, much like Holden and Ponyboy. The historical context makes some of these attempts very much of the time period, such as Rudy coloring himself in blackface to look like Jackie Robinson and not understanding why that was such a bad thing to do, but in a sense that is not dissimilar from the specifically 50s and 60s settings Holden and Ponyboy found themselves grappling with. The main difference is that Rudy and Liesel start out younger and therefore don't think as deeply on their actions and the actions of others at the beginning. Still, Liesel embarrassing herself during a presentation for class is a timeless issue, even if the context is the much more uncommon issue today that she can't read. "She saw them. All those mashed children. Grinning and laughing. Bathed in sunshine. Everyone laughing but Rudy." (78) They play games together, they get into fights, they gossip about people in the town, their relationship feels incredibly normal in a world growing incredibly abnormal. As they become older, they continue to explore the world, and have a continuing pattern of disregarding authority, even joining a gang to steal apples at one point. Rudy is one more relationship that aids Liesel's growth and is also the one where the traditional young adult ideals shine through the most.

As the protagonist of a book that is set in Nazi Germany, the alienation and resentment found in the previous protagonists is on full display within Liesel. There is her brazenly walking alongside Max and the other concentration camp prisoners, willingly being whipped as punishment for doing so, which is the most outwardly powerful thing she does after spending most of the book performing actions secretly. "Liesel, get out of there!" The book thief did not get out. She closed her eyes and caught the next burning streak, and another, till her body hit the warm flooring of the road. It heated her cheek." (514) Of course, unlike the other protagonists where the morality of their resentment is at the very least in question, here it does nothing but reflect better on Liesel. Still, it is the only way her resentment can get out without her being killed, with her being an adolescent girl leaving her unable to create a lasting change. However, that is not to say that she is perfect or does not lash out at authority figures who are not malicious. Liesel strikes up a relationship of sorts with Ilsa Hermann, the mayor's wife who owns a library. Ilsa allows Liesel to enter the library and read her many books, but once the mayor fires Rosa as his clothes washer, Liesel's resentment grows to spiteful levels. "It's about time,' she informed her, 'that you do your own stinking washing anyway. It's about time you faced the fact that your son is dead. He got killed! (...) You think you're the only one?" (262-263) While Liesel feels bad about it, she can't bring herself to apologize and instead starts stealing books from the library. When it comes to her foster parents, though, Liesel stands in comparison to the other protagonists by almost always having a positive relationship with them. Rosa can be harsh, but Liesel's relationship with Hans in particular is one built on mutual respect and love. While Liesel's relationships with authority figures in her life varies

considerably, she still undeniably shows the same resentment seen in other young adult protagonists.

With this delicate balance between horrific historical fiction and more down-to-earth adolescent moments, the core of the story and Liesel's character returns to the idea of innocence and the losing of it during the transition to adulthood. As the descriptions of what happened to her can attest, Liesel unquestionably loses her innocence as she forced to deal with the worst humanity has to offer. She even shows symptoms of PTSD throughout the book from the very start. "The death of her brother and the abandonment of her mother came as a double blow and induced her post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which tortured her for a long time." (Peng and Hua, 786) But if *the Catcher in the Rye* says losing innocence is inevitable, and *the Outsiders* says it is possible and even ideal to hold on to a fragment of it, then what message about it does *the Book Thief* want to impart on the readers? While not a cynical book, showing many examples of human compassion in the face of an almost inescapable evil, the message is more-or-less spelled out by the very last words Death leaves the reader and the deceased spirit of Liesel. "I am haunted by humans." (Zusak, 550) As the story, and thus Liesel herself, deals with both extremes of the human condition, Death finds itself unable to say anything that 'she didn't already know', and thus all it can say is that. The point being that this 'truth' shows us once again that losing innocence is inevitable, that it is an innate part of the human experience that Death is haunted by due to an eternity of witnessing senseless atrocities. Even if humanity is capable of acts of brilliance and beauty, as Death itself admits, the harsh contrast between these extremes in a sense makes these atrocities even worse.



When it comes to Liesel herself, however, as Death mentions, by the time she dies it couldn't hope to impart any words on humanity to her that she wouldn't already understand. While that moment is Death talking to her as an old lady, we do not see much of her at that age at all and yet still get the impression from the events of her youth that these words ring true. Liesel's maturation is one that comes forcefully from all angles, from her interactions with both pure love and pure evil. When the story begins, she, as a child, has little agency. She can only watch as her brother dies and can only make a few token efforts to not enter the foster house she is thrust into. All she can do is steal a book from the graveyard, and that little action is what, as the title would imply, gets a large amount of attention. "The book thief had struck for the first time- the beginning of an illustrious career." (29) Liesel's book thieving throughout the story was previously mentioned as a sign of her resentment towards certain figures, but it is also an important symbol of her maturation, as she uses reading to learn about the world and grow as a person. It is also what helps her bond with certain important characters, such as Hans and Rudy. It also hurts her relationship with Ilsa Hermann, when Liesel herself starts to become more cynical and starts to show some hatred at the unfairness of the world. However, it is revealed that Ilsa was aware of Liesel stealing books the whole time, and in the end, it ironically ends up reconnecting them once again. Her eventual stealing of books from Nazi book burnings is a notable action that lets us know she isn't going to accept the regime's changes blindly, which is reinforced most notably by her friendship with Max

If there was any doubt that young adult literature couldn't use young adult experiences to comment on important and universal themes, then works such as *the Book Thief* should put it to rest. Even with its specific time period, it uses Liesel's story to speak not only on young

adult issues but human issues as a whole. But if you decide to only focus on Liesel and her mental state through the story as it relates to a young adult audience there is still much to unpack, with shared themes and ideas between this and more traditional and/or modern adult works. It is certainly a book that has a lot to say about a great many things, Nazi Germany and young adult issues being only partial pieces of the puzzle. While *the Book Thief* is atypical in more ways than one, it also undeniably a young adult work that further proves the genre's worth.

### *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

*The Perks of Being a Wallflower* does not have too many sources specifically for it, but that is partly because it is the last to be analyzed. Emily Wasserman's 'The Epistolary in Young Adult Literature' discusses the epistolary narration style in young adult literature, that being where the story is told through a series of letters much as *Perks of Being a Wallflower* does. It specifically discusses *Perks* in the process, and how the letter writing aids in the development of its protagonist. Anastasia Wickham's 'It is All in Your Head: Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature' discusses, as the title says, how young adult literature depicts mental illness, and *Perks* is the work out of the four that most directly depicts mental illness in adolescents. Alison Sagara Monaghan's 'Evaluating Representations of Mental Health in Young Adult Fiction: The Case of Stephen Chbosky's *the Perks of Being a Wallflower*' more specifically discusses the depiction of mental illness in *Perks* while also relating that to how the genre represents it overall.

Stephen Chbosky's *the Perks of Being a Wallflower* is notably the most contemporary of the works analyzed here in terms of its early 90s setting, which gives it an immediate sense of potential relatability for its audience. Compared to *the Book Thief* or *the Catcher in the Rye*, *Perks* is a relatively straightforward example of the genre, following the adolescent 'wallflower' Charlie as he starts high school, makes new friends, deals with traumatic issues from his past, and has many new experiences that challenge him and his worldviews. Like most of the previous works, it is a first-person story that puts us directly into Charlie's head and mental state. The exploration of his mental state is particularly important, as he is the protagonist who most explicitly deals with mental health problems in ways deliberately meant to relate to the audience. "Questions of diagnosis notwithstanding, mental health is a common concern for adolescents and their families... The majority of these novels focus on anxiety and depression." (Wickham, 11) However, what makes it unique is the epistolary storytelling style, where it's all told through letters that Charlie writes to an unknown individual. This style serves a similar purpose to the first-person narration in *the Catcher in the Rye* and *the Outsiders*, where it allows us to directly hear from the protagonist and their thoughts. However, it also gives them a more direct outlet for development and coming to terms with their rapidly changing life. "Thus, as a form, the personal thinking and private words of letter writing are well-suited to the reflection and construction of identity which takes place in young adult literature." (Wasserman, 48) Still, as will be expanded on, it also subtly calls attention to the potential omission or misremembering of details in a way that the more stream-of-consciousness internal first-person narration does not.

When it comes to the issues that a modern teenager may possibly face, *Perks* certainly does not hold back on depicting a great many of them. From the mundane with school, friendships, gay and straight romances, and social anxiety, to the more extreme such as abuse, drugs, suicide, and sexual assault, there are a great many ideas touched on at one point or another between the various teenage characters. It is interesting that it is all filtered through a character like Charlie, a quiet 'wallflower' who often does not know what to do or think in any given situation. The previous protagonists were often outgoing or outspoken, but Charlie is very much the opposite of that. Sometimes he does the right thing, such as informing his parents that his sister is dating an abuser, and sometimes he does not, such as when he kisses another girl in front of his date to the dance. "That's when I chose to be honest. In retrospect, I probably could not have picked a worse time. The silence started after I stood up (since Mary Elizabeth was sitting right next to me). By the time I had knelt down in front of Sam and kissed her, the silence was unbearable." (Chbosky, 146) His awkwardness and lack of social skills results in situations like those, where he clearly makes the wrong or uncomfortable choice without fully understanding why it is wrong in the first place. As can be seen with these peculiarities, Charlie is the protagonist who most directly deals with mental health issues. That is not to say that the other protagonists do not have mental health problems, they clearly do, but rather that Charlie's experiences are the ones that expressly grapples with them the most. But whatever the case, like some of the previous protagonists, he is simply an individual trying to figure out the world in both successful and unsuccessful ways. Sometimes there are no easy answers or resolutions to the problems we face, and Charlie's anxiety and uncertainty when faced with such issues only amplifies that point. As the story continues, though, Charlie, while never

becoming a completely outgoing individual, starts to develop into a more self-assured and happy person due to the experiences he faces and the people he meets in high school.

Much like Liesel, a lot of Charlie's development occurs because of the people he knows. When the story begins and Charlie enters high school the first time, he is shown to have no friends, with his only friend from middle school, Michael, having killed himself. While this is an important part of the beginning of the book, and it is brought up occasionally later, it is notably something that Charlie does not dwell too much on outwardly. It quite clearly affected him deeply though. "Well, I think that Michael was a nice guy and I don't understand why he did it. As much as I feel sad, I think that not knowing is what really bothers me.' I just reread that and it doesn't sound like how I talk. Especially in that office because I was crying still. I never did stop crying." (15) Also like Liesel, opening the story with the protagonist going through a traumatic experience lets us know that this story will not shy away from darker themes and that Charlie's mental struggles will provide an important focal point for the story to be told. It also lets us know that it will not give us easy answers to said themes, as Charlie is still perplexed by Michael's decision and has a hard time coming to terms with it happening in the first place. "In this way, Chbosky demonstrates that we can't always find the closure the narrative teaches us to desire and that that sense of unknowing can be difficult to comprehend and accept." (Monaghan, 35) Still, this was the event that spurs Charlie to begin writing his letters to the unnamed individual, perhaps from both a need to vent his problems and an unsaid yearning to have some form of companionship, even if it's anonymous and one-sided. With all of this context in mind, it is no surprise that Charlie latches on to new friends once they appear to show interest in befriending him.

Charlie's new friends both play integral roles in his mental state and character growth. These new friends that he makes are two seniors named Sam and Patrick, and they quickly accept him and his quirks and bring him into their own friend group. While they meet and befriend Charlie at the same time, being step siblings, they both affect him in different ways. Sam becomes Charlie's first crush from almost the second he sees her, and even has a sexual dream about her that very night. "I feel ashamed, though, because that night, I had a weird dream. I was with Sam. And we were both naked. And her legs were spread over the sides of the couch. And I woke up. And I never felt that good in my life. But I felt bad because I saw her naked without her permission." (Chbosky, 32) When admits this to her, she is fine with it while making it clear that she is too old for him. Eventually, she even gives Charlie his first kiss, telling him it should be from someone who he knows loves him. Regardless, that love never ends up as anything more than friendly and platonic by the end of the story. It is still important for Charlie's development, though, as it makes him more aware of his own sexuality, including acts such as masturbation. Indeed, as if the emphasize this inevitable loss of innocence, Charlie describes learning about masturbation in a surprised and childlike manner. While Sam is, in a sense, Charlie's sexual awakening, and the awkwardness of that comes into play a couple of times, it is overall treated with a good amount of understanding.

This concept of understanding awkwardness is further shown through Charlie's friendship with Patrick. Patrick, being a male, instead functions as Charlie's guy friend who he hangs out and speaks frankly with. Patrick is gay, but there is only one point in the book where a relationship between the two is teased and it ends awkwardly even with Charlie being understanding over the whole thing. "We didn't do anything other than kiss. And we didn't

even do that for very long. After a while, his eyes lost the glazey numb look from the wine or the coffee or the fact that he had stayed up the night before. Then, he started talking about Brad. And I just let him. Because that's what friends are for." (172) The 'Brad' referred to in that quote was Patrick's boyfriend who broke up with him after his dad found out and beat him. It is clear that in this moment that Patrick has no romantic feelings for Charlie, and rather that the kiss comes from a confused need for affection more than anything else. These moments of awkward confusion are prevalent though out the book, as the previous quotes have shown, but no matter how awkward they are it is rarely presented in a judgmental manner. What *Perks of Being a Wallflower* understands is that mistakes such as those are inevitable learning experiences when growing up. It is through the understanding that Sam, Patrick, and Charlie have for each other as friends that allow for them to move forward and learn from their mistakes.

Charlie's friends provide important avenues on his path to adulthood, and it is with his relationship with figures of authority in his life that adds on to this idea. Unlike the other protagonists, Charlies, usually being passive, doesn't have strong feelings of rebellion on his own. Instead, it is Sam and Patrick that allow him to loosen up and be more open to new things, for good and bad. They don't tell him act against authority in any direct manner, rather they encourage him to be more spontaneous and this both helps him, such as when he has fun in a production of *the Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and hinders him, such as when he takes LSD and ends up in the emergency room after wandering into the cold. "The policemen found me pale blue and asleep. I didn't stop shivering from the cold until a long time after my mom and dad drove me home from the emergency room." (110) The point is that, while Charlie rarely shows

actual resentment towards authority that the other protagonists do, he also shows an unwillingness to act out for himself in any way at all, whether it be against authority or otherwise. And while Charlie does have occasional bursts of emotion, such as when he cries about his friend's suicide, those are erratic and rare at best. Thus, it comes to his elder friends, Patrick and Sam, to lead him down a path to becoming a more open and freer person, which is the state Charlie ends up as in the very end of the book.

Charlie does have an unambiguously positive relationship with an authority figure, that being his English teacher who insists Charlie call him 'Bill'. By making such an insistence, though, it becomes clear that Bill wants Charlie to see him less as an authority figure and more as a friend and peer. "Sometimes I think Bill forgets that I am sixteen. But I am very happy that he does." (176) Bill sees potential in Charlie's writing, and thus gives him unique books to read and papers to write. Many of these are books that he seems to think apply to Charlie's own life in some way, books with child or young adult main characters such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Peter Pan*, and even *the Catcher in the Rye*. And, as Charlie writing skills grow, mirroring his own personal growth, he is given more varied works with adult narrators such as *Naked Lunch*, *Hamlet*, and *the Stranger*. He undercuts the normal student and teacher dynamic by personally grading these papers with honest C's or B's, but still giving Charlie A's on his report card due to the personal and private nature of them. Furthermore, he takes an interest in Charlie's life and makes a point to listen and give genuine advice to him. "He got this very serious look on his face after I told him, and he said something to me I don't think I will forget this semester or ever. 'Charlie, we accept the love we think we deserve.'" (36) It is eventually revealed that Bill is in his first year of teaching, and, as a recently graduated student, it is implied he is not entirely



sure what he wants to do with his life as he will be leaving the school at the end of the year.

This leads to their relationship culminating when Bill invites Charlie over to his house at the end of the year, where Bill outright tells Charlie that he sees him as a very gifted individual and as a friend. Why this relationship is so important to Bill is never explicitly stated, but he makes it clear that he has gained as much as Charlie has from it. Through Bill and his writing assignments, Charlie finds not only a source of comfort but also a place to outwardly express himself in person, outside of the letters to the unknown individual.

There is one example of a negatively portrayed authority figure in Charlie's Aunt Helen, although their relationship is portrayed in a rather complex way due to the epistolary narration style. While the potential for a biased unreliable narrator is there for any first-person work, the fact that Charlie is writing this to someone specific seems to almost call attention to the possibility that certain details will be left out. However, Charlie is revealed in the end to be consistently telling the truth as he sees it and is using the letters for honest self-reflection and personal growth. "Here, 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." (Wasserman, 50) Even with this honesty, there is still a big missing link in the story that is hinted at more and more as the story continues forward and is not even revealed until the final chapters. Said missing link is the fact that he was sexually assaulted by his aunt, a major source of trauma for him that was hinted at before but only indirectly in another notable example of fragmentation. "I don't really want to talk about the questions and the answers. But I kind of figured out that everything I dreamt about my aunt Helen was true. And after a while, I realized that it happened every Saturday when we would watch television." (Chbosky, 219-220) Charlie's Aunt

Helen was a character who he wrote about in consistently glowing terms in his letters, even calling her his 'favorite person in the whole world', as he gravitated towards the attention she gave him that many others did not. In fact, her death many years before the beginning of book devastated him to the point he is admitted to the hospital. With the sexual assault revelations in hindsight, Charlie's strong opinions and emotional reactions regarding Aunt Helen come across as effects of blocking the traumatic aspects of the relationship out of his mind. Once it all comes flooding back, along with emotions over Michael's suicide and Sam leaving for the summer, Charlie suffers from a psychotic breakdown and enters a catatonic state.

It is in the aftermath of Charlie's breakdown where all of his development comes to head, and he becomes a more assured individual. While he admits that the first few weeks of his stay in the hospital were 'hard', he notes that therapy and visits from his friends and family help him quite a lot. And in the end, he learns that the traumatic events he faced and his issues with mental health aren't what define him. Rather, it is what he makes of himself in the future that will help define him, and even if he is not sure exactly who he is that is still OK. It is a revelation that seemingly lifts a huge weight off of his shoulders, and allows him to end the book in a much happier place. "Tomorrow, I start of my sophomore year of high school. And believe it or not, I'm really not that afraid of going. I'm not sure if I will have time to write letters because I might be too busy trying to 'participate'." (224) This quote from the last page is especially notable, as his best friends Sam and Patrick have graduated and his favorite teacher Bill will no longer be at the school. While the people who became friends with him at school are no longer there, what Charlie has learned from them and from his own experiences

allows him to move into uncharted territories with much more enthusiasm and optimism than he ever had before.

Through its depiction of Charlie and his mental struggles, *the Perks of Being a Wallflower* provides an honest look at the mental struggles many real adolescents face. Even if they were never sexually assaulted or had friends commit suicide, mental health issues are still very common among adolescents. “Approximately one out of five adolescents has a diagnosable mental health disorder, and nearly one third shows symptoms of depression; unfortunately, an ongoing stigma regarding mental health disorders inhibits some adolescents and their families from seeking help.” (Wickham, 11) While it still has the elements of a loss of innocence and alienation with the world and authority that the other works have, it is this explicit focus on tying these common themes to Charlie’s mental health that makes it unique in what it has to say about the adolescent experience. All of these works intend to appeal to young adults, but it is *Perks* that addresses mental health the most and thus helps lessen the stigma surrounding discussing such issues and it is far from the only example out there. If young adult literature was important for only that reason, then that would be good enough.

## Conclusion

In discussing these four works, the overall worth of the young adult literature genre can be clearly seen. It is capable of connecting with its intended audience in genuine ways that are not afraid to grapple with difficult or complex subjects and does so through portraying the mental states of its protagonists in a realistic and respectful way. Holden from *the Catcher in the Rye*, Ponyboy from *the Outsiders*, Liesel from *the Book Thief*, and Charlie from *the Perks of*

*Being a Wallflower* are all well-rounded protagonists who are faced with the troubles of adolescent life in both mundane and extreme measures. There are, of course, many differences between these characters and the works they come from, but this only serves to reinforce that the genre is also fully capable of variety that allows it to speak to young adults of all types.

That is not to say that young adult literature can only be appreciated by young adults. The stories examined in this essay are interesting characters studies in their own right, regardless of the ages of these characters and the audience they were intended to appeal to. Dark and uncomfortable themes are never shied away from without a purpose for doing so, and there is a quality to the storytelling that would be often indistinguishable from more well-regarded genres if it was not for what age group said storytelling was expressly appealing to. So, the notions brought up in the introduction that young adult literature should be grouped with children's literature or that examples of the genre must conform to 'traditional literary elements' are shown to be as dismissive and ignorant as they originally appeared to be. Young adult literature is not a perfect genre, no genre is a perfect genre, but it is certainly one that deserves more respect than it is used to receiving.

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