

From Brokenness to Wholeness: The Traumatic Disorders and Recovery Journey of Charlie in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

Khaalishah Rahmatullah

English Literature Department, UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi

Khalisarahmatullah@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Psychological trauma significantly affects emotional stability, personal identity, and interpersonal relationships. This study focuses on a single research question derived from Stephen Chbosky's film *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012): How are the stages of trauma recovery experienced and navigated by the main character, Charlie? Utilizing a descriptive qualitative research design grounded in Judith Herman's (2015) trauma theory, this article analyzes dialogue, internal monologues, and narrative actions depicted throughout the film. Data were collected via systematic documentation and analyzed through close reading. The findings reveal that Charlie's recovery moves through three key stages: establishing a Healing Relationship, engaging in Remembrance and Mourning, and achieving Reconnection. His transformation illustrates that recovery from severe psychological trauma is not an abrupt cure, but a gradual process supported by genuine social bonds, emotional acceptance, and the integration of painful childhood memories into a coherent sense of self.

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Corresponding Author:

Khalisa Rahmatullah
Faculty of Adab and Humanities
UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi
Jambi, Indonesia
Khalisarahmatullah@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Literature serves as an imaginative medium that explores the complex dimensions of human emotion, perception, and social dynamics. Beyond traditional written texts, film has emerged as a powerful narrative format that reflects psychological and societal truths through dialogue, visual storytelling, and character evolution. In cinematic literature, psychological trauma stands out as a critical theme, illustrating how past distress shapes identity, behavior, and human connection. Directed by Stephen Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012) tells

the story of Charlie, an introverted high school freshman carrying deep, unaddressed emotional wounds. While the narrative highlights typical adolescent challenges like friendship and growing up, its underlying core focuses on Charlie's psychological struggle with repressed childhood trauma stemming from sexual abuse by his late Aunt Helen.

According to Judith Herman (2015), psychological trauma shatters an individual's sense of safety, self-control, and trust in others. Unresolved trauma often manifests as traumatic disorders like terror and social disconnection. However, trauma is not a permanent state; survivors can navigate toward psychological healing. While existing literature frequently discusses Charlie's symptoms or general adolescent struggles, there is a need for a structured analysis of his healing process. Therefore, this article focuses on one primary research question: **How are the stages of trauma recovery experienced and navigated by Charlie in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*?**

METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative research design. Qualitative methods are appropriate for interpreting narrative elements, emotional context, and psychological themes that cannot be quantified numerically. **Primary Data Source:** The film *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012), written and directed by Stephen Chbosky, along with its official screenplay transcript. **Data Collection:** Documentation techniques were used to transcribe scene dialogues, observe character behaviors, and identify key emotional breakthroughs. **Data Analysis:** Applying close reading (Barry, 2017) alongside Judith Herman's (2015) theoretical framework on trauma recovery, data were categorized, analyzed, and synthesized into a narrative descriptive format.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Judith Herman (2015) outlines that recovery from complex psychological trauma relies on restoring safety, processing painful memories, and reconnecting with society. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie's journey follows three primary recovery stages:

Stage 1: Healing Relationship

Trauma disrupts an individual's ability to trust others. According to Herman (2015), recovery cannot happen in isolation; it requires a supportive, safe relationship where the survivor feels accepted and valued. Charlie begins his high school experience feeling isolated and detached. His transformation begins when he meets Sam and Patrick, two senior students who welcome him into their circle.

Building Mutual Emotional Safety

Through open communication and empathy, Charlie experiences a safe environment where he can share his thoughts without fear of judgment. When Sam confides in Charlie about her past struggles and low self-esteem, Charlie offers grounded wisdom:

Sam: *"Why do I and everyone I love pick people who treat us like we're nothing?"*

Charlie: *"We accept the love we think we deserve."* (Chbosky, 2012, 01:24:03)

This interaction highlights a healing relationship. Charlie offers Sam validation, while simultaneously processing his own worth. Mutual trust creates a foundation of emotional safety that allows Charlie to slowly step out of his protective shell.

Validation and Unconditional Acceptance

Later in the film, Sam provides Charlie with explicit emotional validation, ensuring he feels loved and safe:

Sam: *"I just want to make sure that the first person who kisses you loves you. Okay? I love you, Charlie."*

Charlie: *"I love you, too."* (Chbosky, 2012, 01:40:05)

This moment provides Charlie with unconditional care. Herman notes that healing relationships counteract the feelings of powerlessness and shame caused by trauma. Sam's affection helps Charlie realize that he is worthy of genuine love, giving him the emotional stability needed to face deeper psychological conflicts.

Stage 2: Remembrance and Mourning

Once safety and supportive connections are established, the survivor enters the phase of remembrance and mourning. In this stage, repressed or avoided memories are brought into conscious awareness. The survivor must face the painful truth of what happened and grieve the losses associated with the abuse.

For most of the narrative, Charlie represses his memory of childhood sexual abuse, holding onto an idealized memory of Aunt Helen as his "favorite person". However, as his high school year ends and his close friends prepare to leave for college, the stress triggers a psychological breakdown, forcing his repressed memories to resurface.

Emotional Conflict and Initial Resistance

In a therapy session with Dr. Burton, Charlie struggles as his mind attempts to resist the traumatic memory:

Dr. Burton: *"Charlie, your Aunt Helen wasn't just your favorite person. You know that, don't you?"*

Charlie: *"No... No! No! No!"* (Chbosky, 2012, 01:36:45)

Charlie's visible distress and panic reflect the emotional intensity of the remembrance stage. Confronting long-buried trauma causes immediate panic because the mind treats the past event as a present threat.

Verbalizing the Repressed Reality

Breaking through his psychological defense mechanisms, Charlie finally verbalizes the reality of his childhood experience:

Charlie: *"Aunt Helen touched me. She used to touch me. And she said that if I told anyone, it would kill her."* (Chbosky, 2012, 01:38:00)

Verbalizing the abuse represents a critical breakthrough. By putting his experience into words, Charlie transforms a chaotic, terrifying feeling into a concrete narrative. He frees himself from the guilt he carried for Aunt Helen's death, realizing that he was an innocent victim rather than the cause of the tragedy. Grieving his stolen childhood allows him to begin letting go of past burdens.

Stage 3: Reconnection

The final stage of trauma recovery is reconnection. After processing past pain, the survivor reconstructs their life, builds social trust, and creates a renewed sense of self. Trauma no longer defines their identity.

Redefining Personal Identity

After receiving psychiatric care and processing his past, Charlie returns to his daily life with a new perspective. He no longer views himself merely as a victim of tragedy:

Charlie (Voiceover): *"This one moment when you know you're not a sad story. You are alive. You stand up and see the lights on the buildings... and in this moment, I swear... we are infinite."* (Chbosky, 2012, 01:38:31)

Charlie's declaration that he is "not a sad story" marks his transition into reconnection. He reclaims agency over his narrative. Rather than being defined by his past trauma, he embraces the present moment and recognizes his capacity for joy.

Integration and Hope for the Future

In his final letter, Charlie reflects on his journey and acknowledges the importance of human connection in his recovery:

Charlie (Voiceover): *"I want you to know that I was in a bad place before I started high school. And you helped me... You made me not feel alone. I know these will all be stories someday."* (Chbosky, 2012, 01:36:02)

Charlie integrates his painful experiences into his overarching life story. He recognizes that while the trauma happened, it does not dictate his future. By valuing his friendships and looking forward to the future, Charlie completes the recovery cycle, moving from a place of isolation to full emotional reconnection.

Overview of Trauma Recovery Indicators in Charlie's Journey

Recovery Stage	Key Psychological Focus	Textual Evidence / Manifestation	Impact on Charlie's Healing
Healing Relationship	Building trust, safety, and mutual acceptance.	Exchanges wisdom with Sam (" <i>We accept the love we think we deserve</i> ").	Reduces social isolation and establishes emotional security.
Remembrance & Mourning	Confronting and verbalizing repressed childhood abuse.	Admits Aunt Helen's abuse to Dr. Burton (" <i>Aunt Helen touched me</i> ").	Eliminates misdirected guilt and resolves traumatic memory fragmentation.
Reconnection	Reclaiming identity, agency, and future purpose.	Reflects on growth (" <i>You're not a sad story... we are infinite</i> ").	Integrates trauma into life history without letting it define personal identity.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Charlie's path toward healing in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* aligns with Judith Herman's (2015) model of trauma recovery. Charlie successfully navigates his psychological trauma by progressing through three stages:

1. **Healing Relationships:** Forming supportive bonds with Sam and Patrick provides him with safety and acceptance.
2. **Remembrance and Mourning:** Facing and verbalizing his repressed memories of sexual abuse allows him to process buried grief and guilt.
3. **Reconnection:** Developing a resilient self-image enables him to look toward the future with hope, recognizing that he is "not a sad story".

Ultimately, the film illustrates that recovery from severe psychological trauma is not an abrupt event, but a gradual process. Through human connection, compassionate therapy, and self-acceptance, individuals can heal from past distress and reclaim their lives.

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