

Settling the Unsettling Oppositions Through Derrida's Theory in the Novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

D.S.Vidyadhari, Dr.S.Sudha

II MA English Literature, Assistant Professor
Department of English
PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore

Abstract : Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is often read as a coming-of-age novel that celebrates friendship, emotional growth, and adolescent self-discovery. However, when examined through the lens of Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, the text reveals a more unstable and contradictory structure. Deconstruction challenges fixed meanings, binary oppositions, and the illusion of narrative coherence. This paper applies deconstructive theory to Chbosky's novel to demonstrate how concepts such as innocence/experience, presence/absence, speech/writing, and sanity/trauma are constantly destabilized. Charlie's epistolary narration, often perceived as sincere and transparent, is shown to be fragmented, unreliable, and marked by repression and differance. The novel deconstructs its own claims about healing, identity, and emotional wholeness, suggesting that meaning is perpetually deferred rather than resolved. By foregrounding silences, contradictions, and suppressed truths, this study argues that *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* resists closure and exposes the instability of adolescent subjectivity.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Derrida, Differance, Binary Opposition, Trauma, Adolescence, Epistolary Narrative, Stephen Chbosky.

Introduction:

The Perks of Being A Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky has become one of the most influential works in contemporary young adult literature regarding the topics of teenage alienation, mental health and emotional vulnerability. The novel is presented as a series of letters from the point of view of Charlie, a socially isolated teenager and thus has a close, personal and confessional narrative voice. While most scholarly interpretations of the book are based on Charlie's experience with friendship, innocence and growth over time; much consensus also exists surrounding the idea that writers include an assumed level of narrative coherence, emotional transparency and narrative reliability; however all these assumptions are misaligned with deconstruction's purpose. Deconstruction challenges built-in assumptions about how literature communicates meaning and how authors create clearly defined binary oppositions through their works. Rather than assume that a specific word or object conveys meaning that is not subject to change or that there are certain characteristics associated with innocence, healing and identity in Chbosky's work, a deconstructive reading of the novel enables readers to see how Chbosky's text both creates and destroys assumptions of meaning. The text is therefore understood as a place of conflict where the meaning conveyed by Chbosky exists in multiple pieces rather than in a cohesive form.

Deconstruction Theory:

The theory of deconstruction originated with Jacques Derrida and his major works *Of Grammatology* and *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, which challenged how Western Metaphysics has viewed binary oppositions (such as Presence versus Absence, Speech versus Writing, Reason versus Emotion, etc.,) and established the idea that one of each pair of opposites has traditionally been privileged over the other. The purpose of deconstruction is to highlight the ways in which the system of binary oppositions is inherently unstable, and to demonstrate the valuable relationship between what is considered to be the privileged term of a binary opposition and what is considered to be the marginalised term of that same binary opposition. One of the key ideas in deconstruction is that of "differance", which means both difference and also deferral of meaning. What this means is that a sign does not have inherent meaning by itself, but rather it gets its meaning through the way that it is different from other signs and the way that its meaning is continuously delayed. As a result, a textual work has a built-in contradiction and cannot be closed off in a definitive way. Therefore deconstruction is a way of understanding that does not destroy meaning, but instead exposes how the authors of texts have developed their works to undermine their own assertions. Using this approach to the novel provides insight into how the author has attempted to undermine traditional notions of narrative authority, emotional resolution, and psychological stability through his use of deconstruction.

Epistolary Form and the Illusion of Presence:

Letters create the illusion of immediacy and authenticity through the epistolary structure of the work; traditionally, a letter implies intimacy or sincerity, a sign of "presence" to one's correspondent. Nonetheless, taking a deconstructive view, one would notice that the presence of the writer is absent from the letter. Charlie is writing to a nameless correspondent, with no reply, which emphasizes the absence that is inherent in Charlie's method of writing. According to Derrida, due to the nature of writing, it is always removed from the presence of the person who wrote it. Likewise, Charlie cannot communicate to the extent of expressing his emotional state through his letters. For example, in Charlie's narrative, he uses a lot of gaps, repetitions, and silences which contribute to the untrustworthiness of the information contained within his letters. Charlie asserts that he is honest when he says that he "has interest, fascination about how everyone loving each other", but as far as the things he writes about love and connections, they are incomplete and are in the process of being resolved. Thus, the letters convey an illusion of connectedness, yet they also demonstrate the fragmentation of the narrative. The absence of a recipient is symbolic for Charlie, and illustrates the fact that he is emotionally alone and has no real connection with the people he has contact with through communication, which shows us that communication does not provide legitimate or stable connections.

Innocence and Experience:

In the novel, one of the strongest and obvious binaries is innocence vs. experience. Charlie is characterised as being an innocent, sensitive and naive person. In contrast, the other characters in the story seem more "worldly". However, this binary collapses when reviewed using a deconstructive lens. Charlie's "innocence" co-exists with extreme trauma caused by his past, including the repressed memories related to childhood abuse. He seems pure due to repression and is not necessarily truly ignorant. The novel, instead of supporting the idea that innocence precedes experience, suggests that innocence develops through an act of denial. In addition, the characters Sam and Patrick appear to be experienced and confident, yet they both offer insight into their vulnerabilities and insecurities, contradicting the standard belief that they have obtained maturity through experience. As such, experience does not hold a higher position than innocence; instead, the two are ultimately equally fragmented and unstable. The text offers no preference for either term; they are intentionally presented as dependent on each other.

Trauma and Memory:

In the text, trauma is conveyed more through lack, for example, the character Charlie does not really have a name until the last few pages of the text. Until the last two chapters, you only hear about Charlie's breakdown and how it relates back to everything that he has gone through. By utilizing deconstruction theory, it becomes clear that meaning is produced through inclusion of absence as well; by examining how Charlie's life is structured, it is apparent that absent traces will continue to circle around Charlie and his identity. Charlie has experienced numerous losses the death of his aunt, the suicide of his friend, yet he does not connect these events in a way that brings them into focus; thus, readers must formulate their own connection between these events and the ways in which they have shaped/molded Charlie. When he finally remembers what took place with respect to the abuse, it alters the meaning of many scenes, as what you see from hindsight and what you see before this would not connect as they would normally. Thus, we see that this novel demonstrates difference at work by showing the delay in understanding these events. So, through the use of absent (or present) traces, this text is able to demonstrate how traumatic experiences prevent one from acquiring a stable identity and unified narrative truths throughout the text.

Sanity and Madness:

The distinction between sanity and insanity in this novel is made apparent; notably through the journey of Charlie throughout the course of both his stay in a hospital and his psychologist. However, through deconstruction we see that there is an inherent instability in this distinction as well. We see that Charlie's sensitivity and emotional depth is represented by the use of the duality of strength and symptomatology. We also see that there is no definitive answer to who decides what is "normal" or "abnormal". For example, some characters who are considered to be socially productive often display behaviours which are harmful or abusive to self/others; whereas Charlie's inability to fit into the system allows him to have a better capacity for empathy. The hierarchy between stability and vulnerability collapses and thus exposes that sanity is an artificial and vulnerable social construct. Therefore, this novel does not lend itself to a moral or psychological end. Instead, it presents healing as an ongoing process rather than an endpoint. In doing so, it continues to resist closure.

The Myth of Closure and Emotional Resolution:

Emotional closure and resolution are often thought to be a part of growing up, but *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* reads differently than an archetypal coming-of-age story. Although by the end of the novel, Charlie expresses a new hope and optimism for the future, the end is not a complete or even permanent resolution for him, as his final statement of "I will participate" does not help him resolve or comprehend his previous experiences; rather, it simply buys him a little time before dealing with them again. There is an absence of a definitive conclusion for either thing that Charlie experiences through the story. The way that both healing and the lack of finality are presented in the text echoes Derrida's view that all texts are subject to multiple interpretations and that the meanings of texts are often not closed.

Conclusion:

A deconstructive reading of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* reveals a text that subverts its apparent simplicity. Beneath its coming-of-age narrative lies a complex web of contradictions, silences, and deferred meanings. Through unstable binaries such as innocence/experience, presence/absence, and sanity/madness, the novel resists fixed interpretation. Charlie's narrative voice, far from being transparent, is fragmented and shaped by repression and trauma. The epistolary form emphasizes absence rather than presence, while the delayed revelation of trauma demonstrates the play of différance. Ultimately, the novel deconstructs its own claims about identity, healing, and emotional wholeness. By exposing the instability of meaning and subjectivity, it exemplifies Derrida's assertion that texts do not deliver truth but endlessly defer it. The novel remains open, unresolved, and perpetually in motion much like the adolescent self it portrays.

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