“We are Infinite”: Catharsis, Trauma, and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

In *Poetics*, Aristotle writes, “Pity and fear may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure [plot] of the piece” (37). In other words, a spectacular event may excite pity and fear, but Aristotle prefers that the plot create this stimulation of emotions in the audience members. The arousal of pity and fear is a process Aristotle called “catharsis.” In present-day terms, catharsis is defined as the “purification of the emotions by vicarious experience” (“catharsis”). The process of catharsis is a natural release of buried or denied emotions based on a connection one assumes with a character in a piece of fiction. This will be explored through my connection to a character in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and its relation to the trauma that the character has suffered.

In his book, *Catharsis in Literature*, Adnan K. Abdulla suggests that some of the following stages are included in the process of catharsis: “The spectator undergoes an emotional excitation because of his identification with the hero. When the play ends, the emotional excitation is resolved, and the spectator begins to feel repose and serenity” (9). When a spectator identifies with a character or “hero,” he or she makes a connection with that character. At the end of the play, the emotional link is resolved, and the spectator feels a sense of release after his or her emotional excitement calms. The steps of catharsis result in more than simply repose and serenity: the process has positive effects for everyone involved.
Catharsis may benefit both the audience and the society in which they live. According to T. J. Scheff, Aristotle “believed that catharsis had extremely important consequences for the audience, as individuals, and as members of a community” (150). The release felt during catharsis helps alleviate both the individual and the shared emotions and anxieties of the audience. In this way, catharsis acts as a form of therapy. Catharsis works to transform pity and fear into an experience that feels pleasurable. As Richard Kearney states, “[C]atharsis invites us a) beyond a pathology of pity to compassion and b) beyond a pathology of fear to serenity” (52). Compassion and serenity can be reached through the catharsis received from the experience of seeing a tragedy, reading a novel, or watching a film. In other words, catharsis can occur while someone is engaging in a story. “We experience stories. Such experiences shape us in ways that abstractions cannot, for they appeal to all of what we are as human beings—feeling and meaning-making beings with bodies, not just reasoning” (Allen et al. 44-5, my emphasis). The experiencing of a story, the connection we create is something most of us usually do not think about when reading or viewing a story. To illustrate the act of catharsis, I shall refer to the film The Perks of Being a Wallflower, directed by Stephen Chbosky. One scene in particular, set in a mental hospital, caused me to personally undergo catharsis; I made a strong connection with the lead character, Charlie, due to his experiences of trauma and mental illness.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower is a story of trauma and the possibility of triumph. The film follows the character Charlie (Logan Lerman) as he tackles his first year of high school. Over the course of the film, the audience learns that Charlie has experienced a trauma that is never clearly explained in the film. At a party, he lets it slip to Sam (Emma Watson) that his best friend, Michael, committed suicide last May and did not even leave a note (Chbosky). Seeing a fellow “wallflower” in Charlie, Sam and her stepbrother, Patrick (Ezra Miller), both seniors,
befriend the lonely freshman. Patrick, a young gay man, is in a relationship with the closeted quarterback Brad Hays (Johnny Simmons). When Brad’s father finds the two together, he beats Brad, who in turn beats up Patrick in the cafeteria after he tries to suggest the real reason for Brad’s bruises. Charlie steps in to defend his friend. Suddenly, everything goes black, as experienced by Charlie. When he comes back, his knuckles are bruised, bloody, and his hand is shaking as everyone around is staring at him. Not knowing what he has done, he threatens, “Touch my friends again and I’ll blind you” (Chbosky). This is the first hint at what might be wrong with Charlie. However, it is only one of the instances in which Perks translates trauma for the screen. It is Charlie’s traumatic past that drives the film and the resulting catharsis.

Trauma, as defined by leading theorist Cathy Caruth, is “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena [such as blacking out]” (qtd. in Duggan 23). An act, which is never identified in the film, haunts Charlie throughout the film. His Aunt Helen (Melanie Lynskey), who died getting Charlie his birthday present when he was younger, committed an act that is only hinted at\(^1\) that causes Charlie to relive the trauma of it.

Dominick LaCapra proposes, “[T]rauma sufferers have a tendency to ‘relive the past, to be haunted by ghosts or even to exist in the present as if one was still in the past, with no distance’” (qtd. in Duggan 4). Perks represents Charlie’s trauma via Aunt Helen in the manner LaCapra describes. Charlie’s trauma is relived when something in his present triggers a rupture of that present by the past. The film does this with small bits of memory, as young Charlie is seen living through the times that will traumatize him. These are not smooth flashbacks or dream sequences, rather they flit and jump between past and present, in some cases resembling a

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1 Chbosky has never revealed it but the suggestion is either child abuse or incest/rape.
Claussen 4

montage more than a straightforward scene. These events, which Charlie may have not fully experienced at the time, are relived and rehashed again and again. Therefore, as Patrick Duggan explains, trauma creates “a constant present” which repeatedly invades Charlie’s life (25). He is caught in a loop he cannot seem to escape, as the trauma is never allowed to heal because it is constantly being relived. The trauma is never properly in the past. As Duggan summarizes, “Thus, there is no adequate representation or narrativization of the original event, but enough that that event persists in a cyclical, ritual repetition which perpetuates a disruption of linear time, memory and consequently, notions of selfhood” (27). This cycle has to be broken before a trauma sufferer can begin to heal; otherwise they will continue to relive their trauma. Even the sufferer’s very idea of self cannot be separated from their past trauma. Consequently, Charlie’s past can never be defined because it never is past, which causes him to have trouble in the present; his very experience of self is interrupted by his wounded past.

Charlie writes letters throughout the film, which are conveyed in voiceover. This device draws the viewer further into the story: we feel that Charlie is addressing us, which increases the possibility for catharsis. His first letter at the beginning of the film reveals that people think he is “the weird kid who spent time in the hospital,” and he has not “talked to anyone outside [his] family all summer” (Chbosky). Charlie admits to having visual hallucinations, which Caruth suggests is rooted in his traumatic past. When the audience first meets Charlie, he has been in a “bad place” and he worries “that [he] might get bad again” (Chbosky). Considering that his friend’s suicide probably triggered a breakdown, he experiences another breakdown towards the end of the film.

After an extremely heightened moment when he contemplates suicide, the film jump cuts to the image of Charlie in a hospital room. This hospital scene features a small moment most
people would miss. Unless you have had a breakdown and have felt those emotions, you may not see it. But I see that flicker of fear in Charlie, in that moment he asks the doctor about being the person who sees the pain, and in turn, carries it all inside. The fear of being labeled insane, wanting to “stop it,” as Charlie says (Chbosky). The physical movements, the jerks and stutters that happen when you cannot always control your body. It is a small moment, but it is very real.

As a viewer, I was moved. My emotions, as Abdulla suggested, were excited. The surface and the deeper levels of my emotions were awakened during my catharsis. The surface level responded to the image of a young man in a mental hospital, while my deeper emotions found a connection in the fears of the character: the fear of being unhealthy enough to need hospitalization, and the helplessness of being mentally ill. These are the fears that come with mental illness, the terror of not being able to function without serious medical intervention. Seeing Charlie feel these fears may have led to my personal catharsis. “Catharsis is the release of tension experienced by the reader [or viewer] who lives through the character’s situation, sharing his or her motivations and conflicts, and the story’s climax, surprises, and resolution” (Allen et al. 45, emphasis in original). I not only lived along side Charlie throughout the film, I connected with his situation on a certain level.

The connection I felt to the character of Charlie helps me personally. As stated before, catharsis acts as a form of therapy. As Laurence J. Kirmayer explains, “Narration may heal by allowing symbolic closure, bringing a sense of completeness ... to the fragmented and chaotic elements of illness experience. It may transform the meaning of experience by conferring metaphorical qualities or blending representational spaces” (595). I put my life experiences into Charlie’s story and invested in his triumphs. When Charlie is happy, I am, by extension, happy as well.
However, it is also important to have a distance in place when watching a drama and going through catharsis. In the theater, there is the division of the audience by means of the stage. In film and television, a screen of some kind separates the viewer. And a novel is only ever paper in the end. As Kirmayer clarifies,

Reading a story may provide catharsis as one is moved through a narrative landscape that mirrors one's own experience in important respects, but at an optimal aesthetic distance ... created by the use of aesthetic devices that are rooted both in the metaphorical structure of representations and in particular cultural modes of performance. (596)

By keeping a distance in place, I (or any viewer) am able to detach from the story when the film, drama, or novel ends.

By the end of *Perks*, the last fifteen minutes having excited catharsis and a sense of joy and release, it is the promise of a happy ending that leaves me feeling elated. This feeling and promise are expressed in Charlie’s final letter/voiceover. Soaring through the Fort Pitt Tunnel, standing in the bed of Patrick’s truck, he declares, “We are infinite” (Vancheri; Chbosky). Stephen Chbosky explains what he wrote, saying, “In the face of all that pain, they [Charlie and his friends] feel the possibilities for the future are infinite” (“Notes” 13). The potential of a happy ending for Charlie and his friends brings home the experience of *Perks*. Charlie has started to heal. He has reached a new normal that many who suffer through mental illness must accept, as their new life will never be the same as it was before. However, Charlie is no longer alone. He is no longer “both happy and sad [and] ... still trying to figure out how that could be” (Chbosky). His family and his new community of friends are his support. The catharsis I feel seeing this may be a glimpse into the mirror of fiction, where I see a bit of myself.
Charlie says, “Please don’t try to figure out who I am. I don’t want you to do that. I just need to know that people like you exist” (Chbosky). Well, I may never be able to fully decode Charlie and the trauma he has suffered, but I can relate to him, which I think matters more. In the end, we--the viewers--are the “dear friend” to whom he writes his letters. Chbosky made the following comment about writing the novel of *Perks*: “I was not trying to please everybody or reach everybody. I was just trying to tell my own truth... I authentically told my story, and I think that people respect that” (“Notes” 3). The power of Charlie’s story comes from the reality of it; his past trauma is a way for the audience to connect with him as a character. Charlie’s traumatic past and his triumph as he begins to heal at the end of the film is what touches the viewer and causes a moment of catharsis.
Works Cited


