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## ***The Perks of Reading ‘The Perks of Being a Wallflower’ in Class***

*The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is number 10 on the “Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books: 2000-2009” list of the American Library Association (ala.org). This means that it was one of the most challenged books in the period of 2000-2009! *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is a coming-of-age novel about a boy, Charlie, who writes letters to the reader of the novel. Charlie is an introspective boy, who much rather listens and observes than participates in the conversation. But this is about to change, Charlie meets new people, tries to participate a little more and writes all of his new experiences down in his letters.

The novel has a few controversial themes in it, like suicide, drug use, homosexuality and sexual abuse. Many parents found this novel too controversial for their 14-year old children to read in class and argued for a removal of the novel in school libraries. In many schools the novel was removed from the school library, or removed from the young adult shelf in the libraries, after Tom Horne, a superintendent of public instruction, sent a “cautionary memorandum” to school districts to urge them to take action. However, Tom Horne had only read one page of the entire novel. He had only read the oral sex scene, which was said to be controversial (Karolides 394). The novel has been challenged on slightly different reasons, but the controversial themes outlined in this introduction were part of these reasons.

In this paper I will discuss the necessity of the removal of the book in the school libraries, which was based on only one passage of the entire book. My question in this paper is: *Was the message of this passage and the controversial themes so wrong that it was necessary that the novel was removed from the school libraries, or should more attention have been paid to the novel as a whole and the possibilities and insights it creates for young students?*

Firstly, I will look at two controversial themes in the novel and explain why these themes are not a reason for the banning of the novel in any circumstance. Then, I will look more closely at the oral sex scene and put this in the context of the novel, and discuss whether or not this is a good reason for the banning of the novel. Lastly, I will outline the possibilities and insights the reading of the novel in school can create for students.

There are a number of controversial themes in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, which can be identified as being the reasons why this novel was considered to be inappropriate for high school students. I have already outlined the controversial themes in the introduction and I will discuss two controversial themes in this section: homosexuality and experimenting with drugs.

In an article written for *The Alan Review*, there are a number of definitions given for young adult literature. One of these definitions entails that in young adult literature there usually is a young protagonist, who deals with issues all young people deal with or are afraid of dealing with. These issues are, for example, drug dependency, being alone, or violence (Wilder and Teasley 55). In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie wants to become an active participant in life. Charlie is initially a passive participant who thinks and observes people instead of joining in. In order to participate more, he has to be open to new experiences. These new experiences include experimenting with drugs like marijuana and LSD, making new friends and falling in love, to name a few. The experimentation with drugs and the making of new friends can be linked to the main theme of belonging which is explored in this novel. For example, Charlie wants to participate more in life and in order to do that, he makes new friends, goes to parties, experiments with drugs, experiences that help him in some way to live his life to the fullest!

Experimenting with drugs and dealing with your own or someone else's sexual orientation are experiences all young adults deal with. As Shelley Stoehr has said in her article: "No matter what Nancy Reagan has gotten in a huff about, the drugs are there, and many young adults use, or at some time at least try them." (3) Not all young adults may actually experiment with drugs, but they probably do get in touch with drugs one way or another. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie does experiment with drugs (marijuana and LSD), but when Charlie experiments with LSD in the novel, it isn't an experience he wants to have ever again: "Regardless, I decided to never take LSD again." (Chbosky 107) Young adults are, in some way, also warned for the effects LSD can have on them. Charlie goes to the library to see if what he experiences is healthy because he is afraid it isn't: "The book said that sometimes people take LSD, and they don't really get out of it. They said that it increases this one type of brain transmitter." (Chbosky 108)

So, even though there is drug experimentation in the novel and it is an issue which comes back a few times, Stephen Chbosky doesn't necessarily promote the use of drugs in his novel. The experimentation with drugs is one explanation for belonging in the novel, it may not be what parents want their children to do in order to belong, but it is an issue many young adults deal with. I think it's better to read about the effects a drug like LSD can have, other than experimenting with those drugs and not knowing what the risks can be. Shelley Stoehr thinks it is because of the way in which young adults are taught that drugs are bad, that young adults will sooner use hard drugs (4). She says,

“We tell young Johnny from day one, "marijuana bad, marijuana bad, marijuana bad," and then one day, sometime between age 13 and 18, he smokes a joint. It's not an earth-shattering experience: the sun still sets that night and rises the next morning. Now we tell him that crack cocaine is bad. And we run the risk of young Johnny thinking, they lied to me about the pot; how do I know they're telling the truth now?” (4) I think it’s better to show them why drugs are bad by discussing it in young adult literature for example, then to have them trying hard drugs and maybe even get addicted to these hard drugs. By reading about the drug experimentation of Charlie, young adults have a better idea about drugs and the effect drugs can have. I think that a large part of the reason why young adults use drugs is because of peer pressure or because of the mystery that drugs have. This second reason can be rectified by reading novels that discuss drugs, like *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and especially by reading it in class.

Homosexuality is a theme which is also explored in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Charlie’s friend Patrick is gay and even though Charlie himself is not, they kiss:

“So, he said “thanks” and hugged me again. And moved in to kiss me again. And I just let him.”

(Chbosky 173). Charlie is just being a friend here and it doesn’t mean anything, it gives the reader an insight in the nature of Charlie as a friend more than of Charlie’s sexuality. Patrick, on the other hand, is gay and has to deal with acceptance. Or rather, the non-acceptance. Patrick himself is accepted, but his boyfriend Brad is not. There is a scene where Brad gets beaten by his dad after his dad finds him and Patrick in bed together (Chbosky 158).

There is one more example of finding your sexuality in this novel, when Charlie was exploring his own sexuality by kissing the boy next door when he was little. His dad wasn’t too happy about this and even a little bit afraid, and Charlie says: “I guess that’s natural, but I’m not sure why.” (Chbosky 133). Charlie’s father is afraid that Charlie might be gay, by using this quote it becomes clear that homosexuality is not accepted in the society. According to Charlie, it was natural for his father to be afraid that his son was gay. The non-acceptance of homosexuality in society plays a part in this novel, since Brad’s father and Charlie’s father don’t like the idea of their sons being gay.

The theme of homosexuality may not play a very big part in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and this theme may not be what was meant with “references to sexuality” (Karolides 394), but the novel does shine a light on the problem that some parents have a problem with their children being gay.

After having explained some controversial themes in the novel, I will now dive a little deeper into the text itself. The oral sex scene is one of the main reasons in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* why it was controversial and why it was removed from many schools’ libraries. This scene is part of a bigger controversial theme in young adult literature: sex in general. Sex, though, is part of every young adult’s life and therefore it should be discussed. A ‘forced oral sex’ scene may be the more controversial way of

discussing sex in a young adult novel, but I will try to explain how this discussion in its own way fits in well in the novel and should not be a reason to remove this novel from school libraries.

The infamous oral sex scene in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is about a boy and a girl at a party who are intimate: “I said I didn’t see why not, so they closed the door and started kissing. Kissing very hard.” (Chbosky 32-33) At first, there is nothing wrong, they are only kissing. After a while however, the boy wants more than this and starts to force this on her: “He pulled his pants and underwear down to his knees. “Please. Dave. No.” (Chbosky 33) Eventually, the boy forces the girl to have oral sex and Charlie is there to witness it all. However Charlie doesn’t know exactly what happened, when his sister asked him why he didn’t stop them, he said “I didn’t know what they were doing.” (Chbosky 34)

Not until Charlie tells his friends about what he witnessed, which is about two years later, does he figure out what the boy had done to the girl: “He raped her, didn’t he?” (Chbosky 35) Charlie wants to tell someone with authority about this, but his friend Sam (Samantha) explained to him that it is very difficult to prove that the boy had done something wrong especially because the couple was still in love and the girl would probably not confirm Charlie’s story. Charlie still wants to do something about this, and eventually settles on letting the air out of the tires of the boy’s car: “So, I decided to do the next best thing” (Chbosky 35)

This scene was one of the main reasons for the deletion of the novel in many school libraries in the USA (Karolides 394). It is a controversial scene, but I don’t think it’s a reason to ban *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* in the schools. Even though the behavior was not punished as harsh as it should have been considering what the boy did, the behavior was punished by Charlie and the reason why it wasn’t punished as harsh as it should have been is explained well. The main arguments, however, for Tom Horne to urge schools to remove the novel from the school libraries, were the existence of the scene in the novel, the graphic way of describing the scene and the fact that the sex was forced (Karolides 394). Tom Horne said himself that he only read the one page that described the oral sex scene, which means he does not know whether the behavior was punished or how this sex scene was handled in the novel. The behavior of the boy wasn’t condoned, Charlie wanted to tell someone with authority and punish the boy by fighting him during the homeschooling dance but couldn’t do this considering the situation (Chbosky 35).

I think that the way rape was handled in this novel is interesting. In some rape cases in real life, rape is not dealt with the right way. Moreover, people can’t be helped if they don’t want to be helped. In this situation, the girl and the boy were in love and the girl probably wouldn’t have wanted Charlie’s help. Another situation in which people don’t want to be helped in this novel is with Charlie’s sister and her abusive boyfriend. Her parents forced her to stop seeing him, but Charlie’s sister still continued going out with him, even though the boyfriend hit her (Chbosky 27, 41). For me, these two examples in the novel show that love isn’t rational and that sometimes something can’t be stopped even if it’s clear that what is

happening is bad and should be stopped. Charlie is also an example of this. He was sexually abused by his aunt when he was little, her love was the only love he really had in his life. I think mainly because of this, Charlie has suppressed the memories of this experience and therefore has a mental breakdown at the end of the novel when he finally allows himself to remember everything.

Another argument for why this scene should not be the reason why this novel was banned in school libraries, is one given in a book review on *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. In this book review, it is argued that “(...) *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* contains no material that adolescents haven’t on their own encountered in films, TV shows, the internet, or recordings.” (Angell 29) Young adults come across these sorts of things, whether it is in a novel or on TV. It is further argued that because young adults come across it anyway, it’s better that these controversial materials can be discussed in class like the oral sex scene. In class, students are allowed to speak their mind about this scene. In the next paragraph I will further explore the benefits and the insights that *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* can have by reading this in class.

In the other two paragraphs, I have tried to explain why the controversial themes of this novel are not as controversial as they seem at first glance and the novel should not be banned because of these themes. In this paragraph I will outline the reasons why the novel should be read, and should first and foremost be read in class! I have already touched upon this in the last paragraph, and will continue with it in this paragraph.

My first argument is that “classrooms provide an appropriate forum for responsible engagement with controversial materials and issues.” (Angell 30) This means that reading *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* in class provides a better forum to discuss and make sense of controversial themes, such as drug use, than if young adults try to make sense of this on their own without the help of a teacher. If young adults only read the old classics in high schools without the contemporary issues they deal with, they will not become as engaged with the material because they don’t empathize as much with the characters in the old classics.

The censoring of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* aids to the problem of “using censorship to safeguard young minds (...) lowers all debate, discussion, and understanding to juvenile, even puerile, levels.” (Angell 30) According to this book review, censorship is used as an “avoidance technique” (30). The censoring of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* may be believed to protect young adults, but novels such as this can aid in the understanding of the world. Mike Cadden has a similar view: “the YA author can offer the young adult reader significant art while still providing that reader the tools for identifying potentially debilitating world views in the text.” (153)

Furthermore, the reading of the novel in class can give young adults more insights than if young adults read it by themselves. When students get the assignment to write an essay about a specific part of the novel for example, the writing of their own thoughts aids in the understanding of the novel. As with the writing of this paper, getting your own thoughts organized enough to write them on a piece of paper is difficult and makes for an entirely different reading of the novel. In the novel, this is what happens to Charlie as well. Charlie has to write his own thoughts and feelings down, and he grows up and develops different insights in his own life through writing (Wasserman 51).

Another insight of the novel itself is introduced in an article of Mike Cadden, “it is significant that he is never “completed”, as a project in identity, as we ourselves resist completion.” (151) I conceived this quote and the surrounding text as the fact that growing up or changing is not a process that is fast or that even has an end. Students learn that people can have different characteristics and that some characteristics may develop more at some points, as is the case with the writing of Charlie, but that changing entirely is not something which happens often, or at all. We are never done learning, changing and growing up!

In this paper I have tried to make a case for why *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* should be read in class and why it shouldn't be removed from the school libraries. The controversial themes and the oral sex scene should be seen in context with the novel as a whole, the handling of the controversial themes is refreshing and it is necessary for young adults to read about and discuss these themes in class.

Parents should not be trying to protect their children from all the dangers in their world because this doesn't help the children. Reading this novel, and other novels that discuss contemporary controversial issues, can help young adults understand their world a little better, can help them discuss social problems better, can help them organize their own thoughts about their life! And why wouldn't parents want this for their children?

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