



## Repressed Memories as a Coping Mechanism: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse Growth in The Perks of Being a Wallflower

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Received: 2026-04-16 Revised: 2026 05-09 Accepted: 2026 05-17</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Trauma, Childhood sexual abuse; Coping mechanism; Repressed memories; The Perks of Being a Wallflower</p> <p><b>DOI:</b> 10.24256/ideasv14i1.10170</p> <p><b>Corresponding Author:</b> Beth Icalavida Unggul Dalih icalavida77@students.unnes.ac.id English Literature, Universitas Negeri Semarang</p>	<p><i>This article explores the repressed memories as a coping mechanism in Stephen Chbosky's The Perks of Being a Wallflower, focusing on how the trauma of childhood sexual abuse impacts the victim's psychological growth. Through using the Lacanian's lens of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary (RSI), this research analyses how the trauma that is pushed into the Real, only resurface through behavioral triggers. The main character in this book, Charlie, as a subject represents a teenager whose a victim of childhood sexual abuse by his Aunt trying to repress his trauma by making a good idealize and reading book as his coping mechanism due to prevent psychic collapse. By analyzing Charlie's mental breakdown, the study discovers that the return of Charlie's hidden trauma is the key to his recovery psychology and personal growth. The transition from being an observer into a person who feels whole, allowing him to achieve self-acceptance and sense of inner peace through friendship.</i></p>

## 1. Introduction

Childhood trauma generally impacts an individual's mental health well into adulthood. Traumatic experiences during childhood can have long-lasting effects on an individual's mental health into adulthood (Bessel van der Kolk, 2014). Stressful and traumatic events profoundly impact children, and they also have a long-term effect on childhood growth. Here are the effects of childhood trauma that link to the previous terms, such as depression and anxiety.

This is one of the effects of childhood trauma because the victim of childhood abuse often develops long-term symptoms that show up as emotional and behavioral problems later in life. These habits can turn into various mental health issues and disorders (Lindert et al., 2014). The second effect is coping with trauma through acts and thoughts; this is how the victim handles their situation. There are two styles of coping mechanisms to handle the trauma: passive and active. Active coping is when a person takes direct steps to heal and resolve their problems.

Passive coping is when a person does very little to change things because they feel their problems are unavoidable or out of their control (Olf, Langeland, & Gersons, 2005). For example, repressing trauma is one of the passive coping mechanisms. This specific coping mechanism functions by pushing traumatic memories into the unconscious. As a result, they completely lose track of the experience and are no longer aware of what caused their trauma. (Loftus, 1993; McNally, 2005; Piper et al., 2008).

Repressing trauma when the victim of childhood abuse is a form of coping mechanism that can be examined through psychoanalytic theory. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, trauma is consistently associated with a concept of the Real, referring to experiences that cannot be completely symbolized and may be returned to affect the subject's psychological state (Lacan, 1977). According to the *American Psychoanalytic Association (APA)*, psychoanalytic theory itself is repression, which means that the unacceptable or traumatic memories, emotions, and desires are pushed into the unconscious mind, and it will influence behavior, and it is called a coping mechanism.

Research on childhood trauma shows in many cases of delayed disclosure of child sexual abuse, the accuracy of victims' memories becomes a central issue. Since physical evidence is often limited after many years, such cases frequently rely on the victim's testimony and the defendant's denial. Some victims report having lost or repressed memories of the abuse, which may later be recovered, sometimes through psychological counseling or therapy (Goodman et al., 2019). One of the literary studies that can be applied with psychoanalytic theory is novels. There are a lot of literary studies that can be applied to this theory, but the researcher will choose novels to analyze.

Analyzing using psychoanalytic theory initially consists of applying psychoanalysis either to the author or the main character from the novel from the works itself. As the scientific study of the human mind and behavior, psychology

contributes to the analysis of unconscious mental processes. By analyzing human behavior indications of psychological abnormalities can be identified (Wilfinjhon et., Al 2016). Analyzing using psychoanalytic tends to focus on the problems that the main character or the author faced off. One work that can be analyzed using psychoanalytic theory by Jacques Lacan is Stephen Chbosky's novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, which has been explained by several researchers from various perspective.

Some of the previous studies have examined psychological trauma and its representation in literary works using psychoanalytic approaches. Anggraeni (2022) analyzed Charlie's introverted personality and explored how his quiet, calm personality impacts his relationships with family, friends, and his surroundings. Tenriuji and Maca (2021) examined how the main character, Charlie, and other characters use politeness in their daily interactions. Yulianto and Andrias (2024) explore the formation and use of compound words by identifying them in the text, analyzing their components, categorizing them by type, and examining the semantic relationships between their constituent parts.

Moreover, Wijayanti (2025) conducted the ego defense mechanism as a method for a traumatized person to handle their anxiety using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. The differences from those studies, this research uses the psychoanalytic theory by Jacques Lacan, which focuses on the concept of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary, to analyze the trauma of childhood sexual abuse and how his surroundings unconsciously trigger his trauma, that is impacting the growth of the character, Charlie, that happens in the plot of the novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*.

Several studies have analyzed *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* from diverse studies. However, there remains a gap in applying psychoanalytic theory, specifically Jacques Lacan's concept of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary. The study of this paper seeks to bridge the gap between those previous studies using Lacan's lens, which focus on how the subject, or the main character, represses his memories as his coping mechanism for the trauma that the subject experiences.

By using Lacan's lens specifically the concept of the Real and The Mirror Stage, the researcher wants to examine *The Perks of Being A Wallflower* as a case of study, by analyzing how the character, especially Charlie doing passive coping mechanism with his trauma by unconsciously repressing bad memories as a victim of sexual assault of his aunt, and how his surroundings slowly triggers the return of his trauma.

The psychoanalytic theory, particularly proposed by Jacques Lacan, is suitable for this study because it defines trauma not merely as a forgotten memory, but as an experience of the Real, the return of a traumatic experience that triggers psychic collapse. Using the Lacanian concept of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary (RSI) allows for a deeper analysis of how traumatic repressed experiences and the return of traumatic experiences disrupt the subject's psychological stability. This

theoretical framework demonstrates Charlie's idealization of his Aunt Helen, which reflects the Imaginary order, to protect himself from the return of his trauma and also the truth of the sexual abuse (the Real). The Symbolic concept highlights how his use of language, through letters and literature, is a coping mechanism for his recovery and for reconstructing his identity. Furthermore, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is highly relevant for analyzing the repression of memories and its impact on his transition toward a whole, self-accepting subject

## **2. Method**

The method of this research employs a qualitative descriptive approach. Qualitative research focuses on the meanings, concepts, and symbolic elements of the subject under examination (Berg, 2017). Applying the framework of qualitative analysis, the researcher performs multiple close readings of the novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* to describe the events experienced by the object or main character, Charlie, and analyzes them using psychoanalytic theory. The methods employed in this study are the library method, focusing on close reading techniques and qualitative analysis (Darmawan, R. I., 2020). The data of this method is presented in textual excerpts and narrative descriptions rather than numerical data, as the approach emphasizes interpretation and meaning (Creswell, 2014).

The subject of this study is the main character in Stephen Chbosky's novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower: Charlie*. This study will focus on analyzing his repressed memories as a coping mechanism and how childhood trauma affects Charlie's psychological development throughout the narrative. The analysis conducted using psychoanalytic theory proposed by Jacques Lacan, specifically with the concepts of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, to explore how Charlie's trauma repress and how it returns to unsettle the subject's psychological stability

The data in this study has collected through several stages, including the first, in which participants read *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the novel through close reading. The second stage consists of identifying and selecting textual excerpts from the novel that relate to the subject's trauma and repressed memories. The third and final stage interprets the data selected through Jacques Lacan's lens of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real to reveal how repressed trauma influences the psychological stability of the main character. To maintain analytical validity, the data are interpreted consistently using the same theoretical framework, with each finding supported by relevant textual evidence. This systematic approach aims to produce a reliable and comprehensive understanding of how repressed trauma affects the psychological stability of the main character.

For the data analysis technique, this study uses the psychoanalytic discourse of Jacques Lacan. First, the researcher will identify the data by selecting textual excerpts related to the research question; these excerpts will then be classified into

three main categories: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The imaginary is used to analyze how the main character constructs an idealized image of his aunt as a coping mechanism to repress his traumatic experiences. The Symbolic is implemented to examine how the character uses language and expression to express his thoughts and seek affirmation. At the same time, the Real is used to identify moments in which the repressed trauma resurfaces and how it disrupts his psychological development. The data are analyzed to explain how the interaction between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real contributes to the return of repressed memories. This analysis aims to reveal how the trauma, specifically repressing trauma, influences the main character's psychological stability and behavior, and how it is impacting the growth of the main character.

### **3. Result & Discussion**

The repression of memories as a coping mechanism in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* can be observed and analyzed through various narrative passages and character experiences. This section will discuss the course of his mental state, stirring from unconscious repression as a coping mechanism to the eventual 'return to the Real'. By analyzing Charlie's letters as a way for him to process his emotions and trauma. This study aims to get a clear understanding of the impact of childhood sexual abuse on Charlie.

#### ***Imaginary Idealization of Aunt Helen as a Repressive Mechanism***

This analysis will include several excerpts that illustrate how Charlie's idealization of his aunt is portrayed in the storyline. According to Lacan, the Imaginary is a process that forms the basis of like and dislike, love and hate, admiration and disdain, and attraction and disgust between subjects: to simplify a little, it is in the realm of the Imaginary that one sees similarities and differences between oneself and another person and comes to be attracted or repelled. This perspective suggests that idealization arises from forms of love and hate, as well as admiration.

In the first finding on page 12, this excerpt shows how Charlie, the main character, expresses his admiration for his aunt. Charlie expresses an emotional attachment to his aunt, whom he considers an important figure in his life.

My Aunt Helen was my favorite person in the whole world. (Stephen Chbosky, 1999: 12)

The excerpt above shows the relationship between Charlie and Aunt Helen. This line illustrates Charlie's positive emotional attachment to his aunt. Even though it is only the memories of her that can be remembered by Charlie because Aunt Helen had already died when he was a child, he has the thought of a positive relationship with Aunt Helen. According to the Jacques Lacan framework, the sentence above reflects the Imaginary Order (Lacan, p.16-17). It identifies Aunt Helen as an Imago, representing kindness, love, and protection in Charlie's mind.

Moreover, it functions as an idealization figure. In Charlie's mind, through Lacan's concept of The Mirror Stage, the subject forms; Charlie sees Aunt Helen with identification by admiring Aunt Helen as an ideal figure in his mind. By labeling Aunt Helen as his favorite person in the world, Charlie expresses a strong *imago* that leads him to idealize the image of Aunt Helen he creates for himself. This identification allows him to build a strong positive image of Aunt Helen, which simultaneously helps as a repressive shield of his brain to prevent his trauma from being triggered.

This idealization of Aunt Helen stems from the freedom Charlie receives, which leads him to idealize her. This narrative describes the sense of freedom that Aunt Helen provides, contrasting it with the boundaries set by Charlie's parents. The freedom that Aunt Helen provided justifies how they remembered Aunt Helen. It can be seen on page 22:

My Aunt Helen would always let us kids stay up and watch Saturday Night Live when she was baby-sitting or when she was living with us... (Stephen Chbosky, 1999: 22)

And maybe it's not sad. And maybe it's just the fact that we loved Aunt Helen, especially me...(Stephen Chbosky, 1999: 22)

These narrative passages show how Aunt Helen treats Charlie and his siblings. She allows more freedom by letting them "*stay up and watch Saturday Night Live,*" which fosters bonding, especially with Charlie. According to Lacan's concept of Ideal-I (Lacan, p. 16-17), this enables Charlie to construct a "normal" identity for Aunt Helen in order to repress his trauma by insisting that the time he spends with her is "good," not sad. Within the Imaginary order (Lacan, p. 17), Charlie constructs a positive image of Aunt Helen and identifies her as a good figure, thereby creating an idealized version of her.

This idealization functions as a mechanism that maintains repression and covers his traumatic experience. The strong bond between Charlie and Aunt Helen is also reflected in the excerpt, "*...maybe it's just the fact that we loved Aunt Helen, especially me...*" which suggests that Charlie positions his love as more significant than that of his siblings. It indicates an attempt to reinforce his emotional attachment in order to suppress painful memories. Furthermore, the repetition of "And maybe it's not sad. And maybe..." indicates that Charlie is attempting to convince himself not to question his feelings, thereby reinforcing his repression.

### ***The Symbolic: A Cope of Charlie's Trauma***

*The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Stephen Chbosky's novel, also depicts how Charlie copes with his trauma through Symbolic order. The symbolic signs that arise or are mentioned in this novel help Charlie maintain his psychological stability. According to the Lacanian concept, the Symbolic order is the structure of law, language, social rules, and conventional culture that pre-exist and distinguish the characteristics of human beings. Through this system, the meaning is that

psychological stability is maintained, although it often comes at the cost of repressing immediate experience.

Several excerpts illustrate the Symbolic order in this novel. On page 13, this excerpt portrays the relationship Charlie had with Aunt Helen, he perceives it as close and comparable to other relationships. However, importantly, this excerpt shows Charlie's awareness of language in social rules. This can be seen in the excerpt:

It's funny, too, because boys and girls normally weren't best friends around my school. But Michael and Susan were. Kind of like my Aunt Helen and me. I'm sorry. "My Aunt Helen and I." That's one thing I learned this week. That and more consistent punctuation. (Stephen Chbosky, 1999: 13)

This excerpt explains how Charlie observes other people's relationships and compares them to his with Aunt Helen. From a Lacanian perspective, it reflects his participation with the Symbolic order, particularly through his awareness of language and grammatical correction (Lacan, p.153), by correcting his own grammar from "... *my Aunt Helen and me*" to "*My Aunt Helen and I,*" indicates his attempt to follow linguistic and social rules in order to make himself understood. At the same time, the mention of Aunt Helen disrupts his structured thinking. His repeated reference to her suggests that the memory continues to circulate in his unconscious.

By correcting the grammar, it also shows that the subject is following proper language use in society to make his anonymous friend understand him when he recites the stories for him. Here, Charlie also expresses a desire for "*more consistent punctuation,*" which reflects an attempt to maintain order and control through language. However, this structure becomes unstable when he refers to Aunt Helen, indicating that the repressed trauma is unconsciously emerging through the way he processes language as a coping mechanism.

A coping mechanism through the use of language that Charlie uses as a way to prevent his trauma from resurfacing. Due to the trauma, Charlie grows and portrays himself as a highly sensitive, introverted, and observant loner. Charlie mostly spends his break time watching people, rather than participating. Page 30 illustrates Charlie's identity and his abnormality in other people's eyes as an outsider, this excerpt says:

"You're a freak, you know that? You've always been a freak. Everyone says so. They always have." "I'm trying not to be." (Stephen Chbosky, 1999: 30)

The excerpt above shows how others saw Charlie as an "abnormality". Owing to his introverted, observant nature, Charlie's awkwardness makes it hard for him to communicate with others. The sentence above illustrates how many people view Charlie as a freak. The label "*you're a freak...*" positions Charlie within the gaze of

the Other, where social judgment functions as a system of signifiers that shapes his sense of self. According to Jacques Lacan, the subject's identity is structured through the Other, and these external signifiers can be internalized. (Lacan, p.62) Social gives Charlie signifiers about bad things in Charlie's "idea of self". Charlie starts to believe that the judgment or perception of others is true, and because of the labeling he gets from others, it may attach to him. His response, "*I'm trying not to be*" indicates an attempt to conform to the Symbolic order by aligning himself with social norms.

This reflects a desire to be recognized as "normal" within the social structure. The attempt to reject the forced identity, however, points to an underlying repression in which the subject is unable to express the root of his difference fully. Charlie's acceptance of the label and his struggle to disprove it show how repressed trauma continues to influence his identity through the Other. Besides his introverted personality, Charlie attempts to distance himself from the label "freak" that has been inflicted on him by others. This label functions as a negative signifier; moreover, in the excerpt on page 40, Patrick's labeling functions as a form of symbolic validation to reconstruct Charlie's social identity:

"He's something, isn't he?" Bob nodded his head. Patrick then said something I don't think I'll ever forget. "He's a wallflower." And Bob really nodded his head. And the whole room nodded their head...Patrick didn't let me get too nervous. He sat down next to me. "You see things. You keep quiet about them. And you understand (Stephen Chbosky, 1999: 40)

This narrative passage depicts the formation of a new identity through the validation of the Other, where labeling Charlie a "wallflower" serves as a positive signifier. This new signifier operates in contrast to the previous negative signifier "freak," thereby reshaping Charlie's self-perception. Labeling Charlie a "Wallflower" exemplifies Lacan's notion that meaning emerges through an "association of signifiers that meaning appeared" (Lacan, p. 81), for Charlie, getting a new naming as a "Wallflower" functions as a signifier that produces Charlie's social identity. The term "Wallflower" evokes a sense of confidence and belonging in society.

The signifiers are also supported by confirmation from the collective acknowledgment of the group as the Other. Moreover, the interaction between Charlie and Patrick creates a dialectic through the dualities between the subject and the ego. Patrick functions as a 'small other' (Lacan, p. 63) who helps Charlie develop a stable 'idea of self' to mirror and forget his nervousness. In Lacan's concept of "The Other" through signifiers such as "*you see things. You keep quiet about them. And you understand.*" This process allows Charlie to feel worthy by repressing his social anxiety into a meaningful symbolic identity through recognition and validation. This recognition and validation of the Other, where collective recognition operates as a signifier to reconstruct Charlie's social identity, can be observed in this excerpt:

Bob raised his drink and asked everyone to do the same. "To Charlie." And the whole group

said, "To Charlie." I didn't know why they did that, but it was very special to me that they did. Especially Sam. Especially her. (Stephen Chbosky, 1999: 41)

The moment Bob raises his drink, the group cheers "To Charlie," and the whole group follows. It is impactful. According to the Lacanian framework, this moment depicts an emotional instance of imaginary identification with 'little other' and treats them as objects of identification (Lacan, p. 63). Charlie, who used to be called and known as a 'freak', shifts into a 'wallflower', leading him to seek social validation and to be confirmed by the group as the other. Here, Charlie specifically emphasized "*Especiallly Sam, Especiallly her.*" which depicts that Sam functions as the main Ideal-Ego, whose recognition holds greater significance than that of others. Her recognition allows him to experience a sense of wholeness, reinforcing his constructed identity. This collective toast, as a form of validation from "the little other," provides a significant mirrored identity as a shield against anxiety associated with the Real of his repressed traumatic memory.

### ***The Real Returns of The Trauma***

*The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky presents several signifiers that indicate the return of repressed trauma to the surface. According to Jacques Lacan, the Real refers to what remains excluded when a signifier attempts to represent reality, namely, the element that cannot be fully captured within language. In this context, the failure of capturing the signifiers becomes evident in moments of Charlie's psychological instability, where language and symbolic structures break down, allowing the repressed trauma to re-emerge.

The idealized image that Charlie constructs of his Aunt holds a significant impact, particularly in moments of distress. During episodes of panic, the figures that immediately come to his mind—Aunt Helen and Michael—indicate that these idealized attachments remain central within his unconscious. On page 72, this is illustrated in this excerpt:

I just don't know what else to do. I-I always get sad when this happens, and I wish Michael were here. And I wish my Aunt Helen were here. I miss my Aunt Helen like this. Reading the book isn't helping either. I don't know. I'm just thinking too fast. Much too fast. It's like tonight. (Stephen Chbosky, 1999: 72)

This narrative passage depicts how Charlie is dealing with his psychological distress through reading as a passive coping mechanism; however, this strategy no longer functions to repress his trauma. The line "*I just don't know what else to do. I always get sad when this happens.*" conveys the confusion and overwhelmed feeling Charlie experiences. According to the Lacanian framework of the Real and anxiety (Lacan, p. 86), it signifies the point at which all words cease, and categories fail.

The subject is closely facing the trauma that occurs, but the object triggers and fails to process because it gets blocked by the victim, Charlie. "*And I wish my Aunt Helen were here. I miss my Aunt Helen like this*" this illustrates the object, which

Aunt Helen is not an object any longer, because Charlie attempts to dispose of the bad memories that have a relation with Aunt Helen that will trigger his trauma. Charlie relies on reading to redirect his anxiety, yet its failure highlights the persistence of unresolved trauma. This is supported by Bessel van der Kolk's (2014) argument that trauma disrupts language, producing fragmented speech and overwhelming emotional responses.

Occasionally, without realizing it, the trauma can be unconsciously triggered by someone close. Here, Charlie's mother unconsciously mentions Aunt Helen, even though she does not intend to, and it still affects him. It can be seen in this excerpt, page 76:

"Is it your aunt Helen?" It was the way she said it that started me feeling. "Please, don't do this to yourself, Charlie." But I did do it to myself. Like I do every year on my birthday. "I'm sorry." My mom wouldn't let me talk about it. She knows that I stop listening and start to really breathe fast. She covered my mouth and wiped at my eyes. (Stephen Chbosky, 1999: 76)

The data above illustrates how trauma is triggered by the subject's surrounding environment, particularly through the intervention of the Other. The mother's question, "*Is it your aunt Helen?*" *It was the way she said it that started me feeling...*". After mentioning Aunt Helen, this excerpt depicts a trigger that activates Charlie's repressed memory, within his immediate response, such as panicking, crying, and also breathing fast "*I stop listening and start to really breathe fast.*"

According to Lacan's lens, the Real, even though it is unbanishable, will leave some residue (Lacan, p. 85). In this context, the Real refers to trauma that Aunt Helen had left; the trauma will remain in the depths of the subject's or victim's unconscious. When trauma triggers, the residue of the trauma causes a chemical reaction, such as collapsing the emotional system. In this narrative passage, the chemical reaction is depicted when Charlie stops listening and starts breathing fast. It illustrates that even small details, if the subject is not ready to remember every detail of bad memories, can only bring about collapse in the victim.

After the emotional collapse that was previously discussed, the unresolved trauma in Charlie's unconscious continues to shape his development. Even though he gains social validation from his friends, this stability is not fully secure, as the reality of his past trauma continues to disrupt his present experience. This feeling of collapse leads him to go to a psychiatrist. These moments of breakdown drive him to seek psychiatric intervention, especially when he cannot articulate or manage his emotions. On page 71 and 87, Charlie reminisces about his history with medical meditation:

After my Aunt Helen was gone, I went to that place. It got so bad that my mom had to take me to a doctor, and I was held back a grade. But now I'm trying not to think about it too much because that makes it worse. (Stephen Chbosky, 1999: 71)

I don't know how long I kept going to the doctor. I don't remember how long they kept me out of school. It was a long time. (Stephen Chbosky, 1999: 87)

The scene above portrays the vague place that reflects Charlie's inability to articulate his traumatic experience. Charlie applies the language of "that place" to describe the psychiatric hospital. Rather than use its original signifiers or naming it explicitly, he relies on vague language, indicating a gap in symbolization. In the concept of The Real, Lacan states that "tendency to lavish words upon what cannot be described" (Lacan, p. 83). This connects with the concept because the use of indirect expression suggests that the trauma associated with Aunt Helen affects his ability to symbolize the experience. Charlie's statement, "I'm *trying not to think about it too much because that makes it worse.*" This pattern is supported by Bessel van der Kolk (2014), who argues that trauma interferes with both language and memory, resulting in vagueness, gaps, and difficulty in articulation. Rather than expressing his trauma through emotional reactions, Charlie represses his trauma and uses indirect language, revealing the limit of symbolic order, showing that his trauma is so deep that ordinary words are simply not enough to describe it. Charlie also stated about how long he kept seeing the doctor "*I don't know how long I kept going to the doctor. I don't remember how long they kept me out of school*" which indicates a disruption in memory, suggesting that the experience has not been fully processed.

Despite the social validation and Charlie's psychiatric routine, Charlie still continues to experience emotional collapses even though he tries so hard to stop. This emotional collapse is continually linked to the memory of Aunt Helen. Charlie's struggle with his emotional and unexplainable guilt that he had to Aunt Helen can be explained on pages 88 and 89:

Despite everything my mom and doctor and dad have said to me about blame, I can't stop thinking what I know. And I know that my aunt Helen would still be alive today if she just bought me one present like everybody else. (Stephen Chbosky, 1999: 88)

I started crying. It was a real kind of crying, too [...] I read the book again that night because I knew that if I didn't, I would probably start crying again. The panicky type, I mean. (Stephen Chbosky, 1999: 89)

This passage shows the persistent self-blame that continues despite external attempts to correct it. Charlie blames himself because he believes that Aunt Helen's death is connected to him, depicting the guilt that cannot be determined through rational explanation, even though it took place in a distant place. According to Lacan's lens, the Real is an unbanishable residue (Lacan, p. 85). "*I can't stop thinking...*" shows the intrusive return of his unresolved guilt, suggesting that the trauma continues to function beyond conscious control. The return of his trauma always leads to his emotional breakdown, described as "*I started crying. It was a real kind of crying, too.*" This portrays the moment when the subject reacts chemically uncontrollably because the language fails to do so. According to Lacan's concept, this is the chemical reaction (Lacan, 1977, p. 85) that Charlie undergoes due to the residue that remains in his unconscious mind. Furthermore, due to the

failure of repressing the trauma, his coping of reading also depicts the failure to prevent it, indicating that the trauma persists and repeatedly returns.

Regardless of all the collapses and coping mechanisms that Charlie has been through, the trauma that he is repressing resurfaces through a physical encounter that triggers his trauma. This resurfacing of the trauma can be seen on page 184-187:

"...she touched me... You're white as a sheet, Charlie. Do you need some water?' 'No. I don't know.' I started to cry really hard." (Stephen Chbosky, 1999: 184)

"...I wasn't talking to Sam anymore. I was talking to someone else. [...] My brother and my sister and I were watching television with my Aunt Helen... And she was doing what Sam was doing... I don't know what's wrong with me. It's like all I can do is keep writing this gibberish to keep from breaking apart." (Stephen Chbosky, 1999: 185-187)

This part illustrates that the subject is resurfacing his trauma. Charlie faces the physical intimacy triggered by Sam's touch, then all the trauma begins to "unravel. According to the Lacanian framework of the Real, the knots unravel, leaving a little contact between the threads of Symbolic and Imaginary through which the symptoms manifest. (Lacan, p.84). Here, the Symbolic depicts the act of touch as mutual consent within social norms, while the Imaginary embodies Charlie's emotional attachment and desire toward Sam. This little contact fails due to the trauma that gets triggered by the intimacy of their touch and manifests a symptom, "*white as a sheet*," and "*I started to cry really hard*," which portrays his associate's memory of intimacy with Aunt Helen.

This narrative passage depicts how the reality of his trauma slowly resurfaces and gets back to his conscious mind. The line where he says "*...I wasn't talking to Sam anymore. I was talking to someone else*." While in the room, only Sam indicates that it is intended for another person, namely Aunt Helen. According to Lacan, as the knot unravels, in the total terror (Lacan, p.83), the memory starts to unravel by the trigger, which makes the subject remember the traumatic memories as a terror that Charlie tries to repress.

Here, Charlie also still uses his basic coping mechanism of writing a letter, but it turns out to be only gibberish: "*like all I can do is keep writing this gibberish to keep from breaking apart*." According to Lacan, subjects constitute becoming a Symbolic (Lacan, p.80). The coping mechanism of writing a letter is a Symbolic that Charlie did in the Imaginary, intended to keep him from collapsing and to calm his emotions like he always does, but it does not work like usual.

After using letter-writing as a way of coping mechanism failure and the trauma of Charlie's abuse starts to unravel, leading to the realization of his traumatic memories:

The next thing I knew, I was sitting in a doctor's office. [...] 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." (Stephen Chbosky, 1999: 189-190)

This narrative passage shows Charlie's realization about his traumatic memories when he is aware of blacking out in the doctor's office. According to the Lacanian framework, the terrifying dream is not merely a nightmare but the eruption of the Real (Lacan, p. 84). This shows that the realization of his trauma comes from the dream becoming 'real' once he can figure it out, not merely a nightmare. At the time of the abuse, Charlie occupies a position of "helplessness", which limits his ability to process and symbolize the experience. Resulting in the memory that does not appear in a distinct form, but persists as a vague presence. However, as Charlie begins to confront his trauma, he successfully names the signifiers such as "*always happened every saturday*" and "*television*". This transition from the constant and unsymbolizable Real toward the Symbolic, where the subject begins to structure and give meaning to previously repressed memories, is depicted as the turning point in his growth, leading toward recovery.

This final recovery and turning point slowly lead towards the stage of acceptance. Rather than blaming, Charlie's keeping his mental state for his growth by surrounding himself with the people he adores:

"... I listened to the music and thought about all the things that people have said to me over the past year. [...] I thought about Bill telling me I was special. And my sister saying she loved me. [...] And I just thought how great it was to have friends and a family. [...] I was really there. And that was enough to make me feel infinite." (Stephen Chbosky, 1999: 194)

This excerpt shows a final recovery and turning point in Charlie's life. Here, rather than remaining preoccupied with traumatic memory, Charlie begins to adjust himself toward the present through the affirmation he receives from others. The voices of Bill and his sister describe him as "special" and "loved," which function to reconstruct his self-concept. In Lacanian terms, it contributes, as a symbol of association, to the appearance of meaning (Lacan, p. 81).

The climactic line "*I was really there. And that was enough to make me feel infinite.*" proves he was no longer having the thought about the vague shadow of the Real that continually haunts him. This line shows that he is becoming a stable presence by saying "*that was enough to make me feel infinite,*" as its symbolic stabilization reflects his balanced mental state. This moment also represents the wholeness and completeness that belongs to the symbolic realm (Lacan, p.81), which shows that the subject, Charlie, is finally flowing out and slowly doing his utmost to live for this present moment with his friends and family by allowing him to accept the trauma rather than pushing the trauma away. This transition supports Charlie's ultimate growth.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Charlie's growth and psychological experience are shaped by the dynamic interaction among the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, as proposed by Jacques Lacan. Rather than

functioning as separate structures, these three orders operate together to repress, manage, and return to disrupt the subject's psychological study, which eventually leads to his ultimate growth. Initially, Charlie represses the trauma through the idealization of Aunt Helen, allowing him to maintain his emotional attachment by having a good perspective of his aunt, displacing the traumatic experience into his unconsciousness.

The repression that Charlie holds is supported by the Symbolic order, where language, writing, and social validation function as his coping mechanism to stabilize his psychological state. The Real becomes evident when both the Imaginary and the Symbolic fail to sustain Charlie's psychological stability. The trauma associated with Aunt Helen cannot be fully repressed because it exists as an unsymbolizable residue within the unconscious. This is reflected in Charlie's emotional breakdowns, panic responses, and inability to recall or articulate certain experiences. As Bessel van der Kolk (2014) suggests, trauma interferes with both language and memory, resulting in vagueness, gaps, and difficulty in articulation.

The childhood sexual abuse that Charlie experienced shaped his development into a lonely and emotionally observant person. Because of the trauma, which remains repressed, associated with Aunt Helen continuing to disrupt engagement fully in social relationships, the social validation that comes from social labels such as "freak" and later "wallflower" interprets how societal perception of him is. As a result, Charlie positions himself as an observer rather than an active participant in social interactions, indicating a defensive retreat to avoid emotional triggers. Therefore, his loneliness is not a personal characteristic but an expression of unresolved trauma that shapes his social interactions.

However, the result reveals that the physical intimacy with Sam functions as a trigger that disrupts the balance between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, leading it to the Real as the unraveling of trauma. This process concludes with the return of repressed memory, where the trauma is no longer repressed indirectly but becomes consciously recognized. The realization marks shift from the unsymbolized Real toward the Symbolic: "happened every Saturday" and "television" as signifiers that fragment his experiences.

This transition suggests that trauma of the Real is not only destructive, but also confronting and restructuring traumatic memory. Support from others, particularly being recognized, stabilizes his identity. His final "infinite" reflects a shift toward symbolic integration, where trauma no longer dominates his psychological state.

This study contributes by applying Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic framework of the three orders to examine how childhood trauma shapes growth in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, by revealing how trauma is repressed through idealization and returns through language, writing, and symbolic disruptions to interpret characters' growth, development, and psychological conflict in literary work. This study offers insight into how childhood trauma can shape identity,

emotional regulation, and social interaction.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the research and discussion, this study demonstrates the repression of memories through coping mechanisms in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. By analyzing it using Jacques Lacan's framework that focuses on the Real, the Symbolic Order, and the Imaginary, it shows that repressing memories due to sexual abuse has its own impacts on the victim's life. The coping mechanism that Charlie always uses when he experiences an emotional collapse is crying and reading books, which serves as an attempt to prevent the reality of the trauma from surfacing. However, the Symbolic touch Sam has given Charlie helps him recall the traumatic incident he is trying to repress. The transition from being an observer to becoming a wallflower and spending his final moments "infinite" symbolizes psychological growth by moving toward trying to accept the trauma that was inflicted by Aunt Helen, the person that Charlie loves, and trying to live his present life to the fullest.

This study applies Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, focusing on the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary, to analyze the trauma of the main character, Charlie, in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Here, the researcher focuses on the repressed memories as Charlie's coping mechanisms to deal with his sexual abuse that happened when he was a kid, impacting his childhood. By focusing on the Lacanian framework, this analysis may require an alternative interpretation provided by modern psychology, so that many people can also educate themselves about the impact of sexual abuse.

Based on the research study and the use of psychoanalysis theory by Jacques Lacan for analyzing. Since the narrative suggests that Aunt Helen is also a victim of abuse, further studies could analyze her as a subject rather than mere terror by explaining the reason behind her transition from the victim to a perpetrator.

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