Form and Emotion in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The fifteen-year-old protagonist Charlie, who is "both happy and sad" and "still trying to figure out how that could be" in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), finds himself in an emotional dilemma typical for adolescents and frequently presented in coming-of-age novels.[1] Not only is Charlie scared of starting high school but he also struggles to understand why his best friend Michael committed suicide without leaving a note for Charlie to read. Despair, sadness, self-doubt, occasional glimpses of hope and a deep longing for love are only some of the emotions dominating Charlie's coming of age. Charlie, an underdog at his school and classified as the wallflower of his group of friends, starts letter writing over the course of one year to help him battle his fear of starting high school without having friends. His epistles record his own position within his social context as much as they establish a space in which Charlie learns to reflect critically on his role in life.[2] While Charlie's epistles show a growing sense of self-reflexivity, Charlie eventually succeeds in fulfilling a number of promises he discusses in his epistles, such as attaining friendships with like-minded people at his school, growing closer to his family members, as well as falling in love with someone who cherishes him for who he is. Moreover, writing allows Charlie to remember his past of having been sexually molested by his late Aunt Helen, whom he praises as his favourite person of all time despite

1 Chbosky 1999: 3.

2 Cf. Matos 2013: 86.

what she did to him. Thus, the epistolary form constitutes a vital tool in Charlie's learning about his idenity formation and initiation into the adult world.

This essay asks how Chbosky employs the epistolary form as a means of demonstrating the protagonist's ability to assess his struggles with what he regards as his identity and self in a crucial phase of development. It will argue that Charlie's writing encourages his self-scrutiny, which helps in his understanding of how he can become more emotionally stable. Therefore, his attachment to writing letters figures as the central solution in Charlie's struggle: He succeeds in coming to terms with his repressed past of having been molested by his aunt, whom he thinks of as his best childhood friend, and ultimately learns what it means to be loved, while evolving "from a passive observer of life to an active participant".[3]

While the first section of this paper will focus on situating Chbosky's novel within the context of the epistolary Young Adult novel, the second section will utilize Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" in order to analyse Charlie's inner emotional upheaval. This latter section will address the cluster of promises he has constructed for himself, consisting of his hope to make friends, being able to enter a romantic relationship and accepting love, and freeing himself from letting the absent presence of his deceased aunt Helen hover over every decision he makes. Berlant's theory of "cruel optimism" focuses on affective and social belonging.[4] She argues that the individual forms bonds to various objects, hoping that these objects will make their fantasies a reality but which ultimately fail to do so. In *Perks*, Charlie faces a struggle in which he questions the reasons why he has been positioned into the role of the outsider, unable to express his feelings and find people to share his social life with and to ultimately attain what Berlant calls the "good life". Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" shall help in the analysis of this inner struggle of overcoming his attachment to his aunt, whose presence hinders him in attaining happiness. Her concept shall help in understanding how letter writing eventually helps Charlie succeed in coming to terms with his past and implications for his future.

2. CHBOSKY'S NOVEL AND EPISTOLARY FORM

When trying to determine the novel's genre, two factors need to be considered: first, the characteristics of the epistolary form and of the diary; second, the narra-

3 Ibid.

4 Berlant 2011.

tive situation and communicative set-up implied by *Perks*. Regarding the first issue, it is central that Charlie is the only character writing the epistles. The novel thus lacks the communication character, as communication is one-sided in the novel. This begs the question as to why Charlie writes letters instead of diary entries. Regarding the second issue, the addressee of Charlie's epistles seems to be a stranger who Charlie does not know personally or, if at all, only superficially. The person's name is kept a secret and so is that of the writer, who uses 'Charlie' as his pseudonym, for he points out in his first letter that he would prefer to remain anonymous in order to be utterly candid in his writing.

2.1 The Epistolary Novel

Generally speaking, epistolary novels comprise a series of letters. These epistles present communication between two or more correspondents who are physically separated; hence, the letter serves "as a bridge between sender and receiver".[5] Altman claims that the epistolary form either draws the letter writers closer to each other or emphasizes their physical distance.[6] Concerning the unique form of any epistolary fiction, Altman regards their composition as an "epistolary mosaic" which evolves out of individual subunits, as each "letter retains its own unity while remaining a unit within a larger configuration".[7]

Despite retaining their own unity, there is a narrative continuity to be detected in the sum of the epistles comprising the epistolary novel. Narrative continuity is, according to Altman, "largely limited to novels dominated by a single correspondent".[8] When a single plot line starts to dominate the series of epistles, "narrative continuity frequently overrides epistolary discontinuity".[9] This development is seen when plot development becomes more important than identifying the narrator. When continuity is emphasized, the epistolary form limits the story to one single plot line as constituted by one letter writer and one addressee, whose letter exchange is then presented in a chronological manner.[10] On the other hand, foregrounding the epistolary form's discontinuity can be emphasized by the instalment of various plot lines or the disruption of the temporal line. Moreover, variously coloured writing styles can emphasize the illusion of reading sets of epistles written by a number of different correspondents. The serial

5 Altman 1982: 13.

6 Ibid.: 14-15.

7 Ibid.: 169.

8 Ibid.: 170.

9 Ibid.

10 Cf. ibid.: 169.

nature of epistles can instal cliffhangers or suspense between the epistles, which, too, contribute to the employing of discontinuity of the epistolary form.

As far as the role of the reader of the epistolary novel is concerned, he or she is given the role of the "detective-collector", piecing together parts from the epistles to establish a certain continuity in plot that allows an understanding of the fragmentary narrative as a whole.[11] While the epistolary form usually serves as a means of communication between two or more physically dislocated correspondents and is thus frequently utilized to tell stories of love, it can also serve the purpose of assessing and reevaluating repressed emotions. In Saul Bellow's 1964 epistolary novel *Herzog*, the protagonist writes to people from his past, some of whom are already dead. "Herzog's epistolary style of free association enables him to recall his past, to bring to the conscious level repressed emotions", Altman claims.[12] In Bellow's novel, the epistle can be thought of as the "medium through which he [Herzog] resurrects and reconstructs his past. […] Only after the past has been conquered and classified as past can Herzog begin anew", Altman points out.[13] Thus, epistolary communication does not necessarily need to take place between two correspondents in different locations. In the case of Bellow's *Herzog*, epistolary mediation takes on the role of connecting the subconscious with the past of the protagonist. "Herzog's abandonment of his scribbling at the end of his novel constitutes a declaration of mental stability".[14]

To sum up, not only does the epistolary novel offer a narrative, but each of its subunits, the letters, do the same, and can therefore be considered separate narratives. While narrative continuity is more common in monologic epistolary works, narrative discontinuity occurs more easily when the epistolary work is of a dialogic or polylogic character, containing the epistles of two or more correspondents. The reader is given the role of the detective, who is encouraged to piece together the epistles despite possible discontinuity due to narrative and spatial distribution. While the epistolary form generally serves the purpose of communication between two or more correspondents who are separated in location, the writing of letters can, moreover, fulfil a psychotherapeutic purpose and help the writer face suppressed emotions of the past, as is the case in *Perks*, which I will further analyse later.

11 Ibid.: 173.

12 Ibid.: 41.

13 Ibid.: 42.

14 Ibid.

2.2 The Epistolary Form vs. Diary Fiction

In the distinction between the epistolary form and diary fiction, a crucial facet characterizing and intrinsic to the epistolary form is the desire for exchange. "In epistolary writing the reader is called upon to respond as a writer and to contribute as such to the narrative".[15] Altman suggests that what distinguishes the two forms is the "existence of a real addressee", who is perceived as "other" than the writer of the epistles.[16] Just like Altman, Abbott is of the opinion that "letters require an *addressee* and a diary does not".[17] The central idea of the letter enabling a means of communication stands in stark contrast to the characteristics intrinsic to diary fiction as well as the diary novel.

> The term 'diary' evokes an intensity of privacy, cloistering, isolation, that the term 'letter' does not. From our point of view, the strategic decision that the author makes is not the decision to have periodic entries in letter form or diary form, but the decision to create cumulatively the effect of a conscious thrown back on its own resources, abetted only by its pen. This effect is enabled by a proportional suppression of other writing, writing by narrators or correspondents.[18]

In diary fiction, Abbot claims, correspondence with other narrators is suppressed, causing the writer of the journal entries to reflect without any influence from the outside. Abbott, moreover, discusses the letter-journal strategy, or "échange unilateral". Richardson's *Pamela; or: Virtue Rewarded* of 1740 qualifies as such a letter-journal, being made up of both epistles as well as journal entries, which allow the protagonist Pamela "to reflect and improve upon her psychological well-being".[19]

The boundaries between the letter and diary are, however, often blurred. Fictive diaries sometimes have an addressee, which leads to the question of whether they are disqualified as diaries. "Fictive diarists commonly address their remarks to someone – friend, lover, God, the diary itself", which is the case in well-known diary novels such as Anne Frank's *The Diary of Anne Frank*, in which Anne addresses her diary as 'Kitty'; it is also the case in several Young Adult novels which entail letters to God, such as Judy Blume's *Are You There God?*

15 Ibid.: 89.

16 Ibid.: 46.

17 Abbott 1984: 9.

18 Ibid.: 11.

19 Dale 2000: 53.

It's Me, Margaret (1970) or Sydney Hopkins' *Dear Mister God, This Is Anna* (1974).

Abbott, moreover, suggests that it is not only the existence or nonexistence of an addressee that distinguishes diary from epistolary fiction, but to which extent that addressee "is given an independent life and an active textual role in the work".[20] In contrast to the traditional correspondence novel as discussed earlier, sometimes the addressee is merely given the role of the listener. In Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), the addressee is "the silent friend, real or invented" whom fictive diarists frequently address.[21] Abbott points out that because the character of the addressee is constructed through Werther's words only, "he is easily conceived as Werther's other self, the solid rational self that Werther seeks to override".[22]

As has been shown, the epistolary form distinguishes itself from the diary in the sense that the diarist lacks the need for exchange. The diarist does not intend for his writing to be shared or commented upon. Instead, the diary serves a reflective purpose, allowing for its writer to reconsider their positioning in the diegetic reality in isolation, while the author of the letter intends for his epistles to be (usually) answered by an addressee other than himself or herself.

2.3 The Young Adult Epistolary Novel

The epistolary form has been frequently employed within Young Adult fiction over the past years. Wasserman claims that "even though there seems to be more works written by, for, and about young adults in diary form, such as Anne Frank's seminal *The Diary of a Young Girl*" or Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), "there are many examples of adolescent fiction that use the epistolary style".[23] While novels such as John Marsden's *Letters from the Inside* (1994), Christ Crutcher's *Chinese Handcuffs* (1996), Gary Crew and Libby Harthorn's *Dear Venny, Dear Saffron* (2000), and Megan McCafferty's *Sloppy Firsts (2001)* all use the epistolary form in its traditional sense, works like Rainbow Rowell's *Attachments* (2011), Maria Semple's *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* (2012), or Lauren Myracle's "The Internet Girls trilogy", including *TTYL* (2004), *TTFN* (2006), and *L8TER, G8TER* (2008) among others, are told in emails, scripts of online chats, instant messages, snip-

20 Abbott 1984: 10.

21 Ibid.: 11.

22 Ibid.

23 Wasserman 2003: 48.

pets from journal entries, or other web based means of communications, which mimic epistolary communication to a certain degree.

Wasserman points out that the epistolary form is a well fitted means to mirror how the protagonist "is trapped within his or her own world and within his or her own skin".[24] Because adolescence marks a time in the individual's life that is generally characterized as rocky, the "epistolary is well suited to adolescent literature, for young adult literature describes how the interior monologue can lead to constructive change".[25] Moreover, it is in particular the interior monologue of the protagonist that allows the reader to enter the young protagonist's mind and diegetic reality he or she writes about in his or her epistles.[26]

2.4 *Perks* as an Epistolary Novel

In Chbosky's novel, Charlie is the only letter writer. While an actual narrating instance is presented by the role of the narrator, "the reader has the impression that he is confronted by a personalized narrator, as opposed to direct or immediate presentation, that is, the reflection of the fictional reality in the consciousness of a character".[27] As a narrator, Charlie seems personalized, as he actively discusses his daily experiences in his epistles and thus appears to be tangible as a narrating instance. Moreover, the character of Charlie inhabits the diegetic reality he writes about in his series of epistles. Thus, the novel can be classified as first-person narration in the traditional sense. As far as perspective in the novel is concerned, Charlie is the hero of the story he tells through his epistles. He provides the reader with an internal perspective of his story. The narrating and experiencing self in Chbosky's novel can be considered almost identical. Because there is little time to reflect on his experiences, Charlie narrates from a more immediate perspective, usually composing his letters on the days the incidents he writes about happen. There is no time for maturation to take place between experiencing and narrating. Nevertheless, the novel illustrates Charlie's maturing over time. While his individual epistles might show his inability to reflect effectively on his own person, Charlie is obviously working on improving his self-awareness: "Also, when I write letters, I spend the next two days thinking about what I figured out in my letters".[28]

24 Ibid.

25 Stringer quoted in Wasserman 2003: 48.

26 Cf. Wasserman 2003: 48-49.

27 Stanzel 1984: 48.

28 Chbosky 1999: 31.

While *Perks* fulfills most of Stanzel's prerequisites for a first-person narrative and can be considered an epistolary novel as pointed out above, the novel's structure also resembles that of a diary to a certain degree. As pointed out earlier, however, Charlie's addressee is part of the novel's diegetic world. In his series of epistles, Charlie addresses his recipient as "dear friend" and gives the reason why he chose that person to address his letters to: "I am writing to you because she said you listen and understand and didn't try to sleep with that person at that party even though you could have".[29] Charlie thus seems to have chosen his recipient because he thinks she or he is non-judgmental. Therefore, Charlie is not afraid to be honest in his writing. While Charlie shares not only his achievements with the addressee of his epistles but also the unpleasant truths he discovers through writing, such as remembering being molested by his aunt and realizing how lonely he is, Charlie feels inclined to keep his own identity a secret as well. Charlie points out in his first letter:

> Please don't try to figure out who she is because then you might figure out who I am, and I really don't want you to do that. I will call people by different names or generic names because I don't want you to find me. […] I just need to know that someone out there listens and understands […].[30]

As far as the role of the addressee of Charlie's epistles is concerned, he or she cannot be introduced as Charlie keeps his or her identity a secret. Charlie does mention, however, that his addressee is older and more experienced than him. "Do you know what 'masturbation' is? I think you probably do because you are older than me", Charlie assumes of his addressee.[31] At other times, Charlie shares his most intimate thoughts, telling his addressee of his love for his friend Sam or of his sister's abortion, which "[n]ot anyone […] not ever" can learn about, which again emphasizes the addressee as being a stranger to Charlie and his family.[32] Even though the reader of Chbosky's novel is given little information about the anonymous recipient of Charlie's epistles, we do know that Charlie sends them off and thus experiences a sense of closure. In one of his epistles he writes, "I knew that if I didn't put it in a mailbox that I couldn't get it back from, I would never mail the letter".[33] Wasserman claims that "Charlie needs to feel as though someone is listening to him, and these letters are his

29 Ibid.: 3.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.: 23.

32 Ibid.: 125.

33 Ibid.: 98.

chosen medium for being heard".[34] The addressee offers his presence in the form of mute responsiveness by "listening" to what Charlie has to say.[35]

To conclude, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* can be classified as an epistolary novel rather than a diary novel for the following reasons: despite lacking a need for exchange, Charlie sends off the epistles, which provides closure and at the same time suggests that his addressee is a real person whose address Charlie has. By sending them off, Charlie is given the impression that he is heard and has made the friend he lacks in real life in the recipient of his epistles. I claim that the epistolary form seems to have been chosen carefully in that it makes clear the message that the act of writing functions as a means of accepting the past Charlie has struggled to come to terms with. Only during the course of the novel does he find a real-life listener in his friends Patrick and Sam. This realization would not have been possible if Charlie wrote down his fears, wishes, hopes, and dreams in a diary without having to trust that there are people like his addressee who are, according to Charlie, genuinely good people willing to listen to what he has to share.

3. CRUEL OPTIMISM

Charlie, a loner and outsider at his new school, observes instead participates in social events and is deeply hurt by the fact that his best friend, Michael, commits suicide without leaving a note for Charlie to explain this atrocious act. Only through writing does Charlie gradually regain emotional stability. Moreover, Charlie hopes not only to come to terms with his past, but also to fulfil a number of promises he has made to himself which he thinks will help him to eventually attain happiness, such as crafting a closer bond with his family, making new friends, as well as improving his writing and language skills. Repeatedly, he refers to his dead Aunt Helen, who, he claims, was the only person to ever love him unconditionally: "My Aunt Helen was my favorite person in the whole world", he says of her.[36] However, his attachment to his aunt, for whose death he blames himself – she died in a car accident when about to buy Charlie's birthday present – keeps him from obtaining a level of mental stability that would allow him to have hope for his future and trust in reaching the goals he has set for himself. Reading Charlie's emotional struggle of suppressing the memory of his

34 Wasserman 2003: 50.

35 Cf. Johnson 1986: 30.

36 Chbosky 1999: 6.

unhealthy relationship with and distorted image of his aunt through Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism", offers the possibility of contextualizing Charlie's journey over the span of a year in which he writes to his "dear friend", eventually remembering having been molested as a child and finding closure with his past. As he lets go of allowing his aunt's legacy to control his everyday life, he ultimately forgives her and understands that she is only one of the people who have made him the person he is by the end of the novel.

Gaining a Sense of Self

Berlant claims that "all attachments are optimistic".[37] So are Charlie's, as he is sure that letter writing will help him in his personal development. The catch is that people tend to be attached to attaining something that turns out to be an obstacle to personal fulfilment. Instead of attaining a single object, whether it may be tangible or intangible, it is much rather a cluster of promises "we want someone or something make to us and make possible for us".[38] Only when those expectations are fulfilled does an individual consider himself or herself capable of being happy and attaining the so-called "good life". While Berlant does not define this idea of the good life, she claims that, for many, it turns into a "bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it".[39] Charlie hopes to be able to live his own idea of the good life once he has fulfilled the following promises comprising his own personal cluster.

First, Charlie's aim is to acquire a group of like-minded people with whom he can share his life. "It would be very nice to have a friend again. I would like that even more than a date", Charlie writes.[40] Second, Charlie repeatedly mentions how he wishes to be closer to his family members. Just as in school, Charlie embodies the role of the outsider in his family. When his best friend Sam tells Charlie she loves him, he writes, "it was the third time since my Aunt Helen died that I heard it from anyone", which also suggests that he urges to hear such affirmations in the social space of his family.[41] Third, Charlie longs to find love and enter a romantic relationship with Sam. He is, however, hindered from being with her, as his memory of being molested by his aunt when Sam touches him in a sexual way stops him from enjoying it. Cruel optimism can in this discussion

37 Berlant 2011: 23.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.: 27.

40 Chbosky 1999: 23.

41 Ibid.: 69.

be thought of as a "model for encountering scenes where object loss appears to entail the loss of an entire world and therefore a loss of confidence about how to live on, even at the microlevel of bodily comportment".[42] Letting go of the memory of his aunt in the setting of a sexual encounter would allow Charlie to be with Sam and freely live his sexuality. Because his aunt is the only one who has ever hugged Charlie throughout his childhood, he clings to the memory of her: "Sam then gave me a hug, and it was strange because my family doesn't hug a lot except my Aunt Helen".[43] Fourth, Charlie wishes to turn his passion for writing into a profession one day. Through writing additional assignments for his English class teacher, Bill, Charlie develops a love for writing outside the space of his series of letters and his style gradually develops from being descriptive to lively.

Charlie's inability to detach himself from letting his memory of his aunt influence his daily life is also due to Charlie blaming himself for his aunt's death: "And I know that my aunt Helen would still be alive today if she just bought me one present like everybody else. I miss her terribly".[44] That feeling of guilt keeps Charlie from letting go of his past and his memories of Aunt Helen. "[A] poetics of attachment always involves some splitting off of the *story* I can tell about wanting to be near x (as though x has autonomous qualities) from the *activity* of the emotional habitus I have constructed, as a function of having x in my life", explains Berlant.[45] In the novel, x is embodied by Charlie's memories of his aunt. Having constructed a habituated emotional reality around his belief that his aunt was the only person to ever love him, Charlie keeps her memory in close proximity in his mind and is thus unable to detach himself from the memories he has of her, nor from feeling responsible for her death.

In the course of writing his epistles, however, Charlie realizes that there is no vast change when he attains some of his goals. Berlant offers the following explanation for why optimism turns cruel: "optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation" an individual is hoping to attain by reaching a certain goal.[46] As far as his cluster of promises is concerned, Charlie does succeed in acquiring a group of people around him whom he feels comfortable with and enjoys being around. Moreover, he notices that they care about him, too, in the way his aunt did. As far as his hope of feeling closer to his parents and sib-

42 Berlant 2011: 16.

43 Chbosky 1999: 24.

44 Ibid.: 98.

45 Berlant 2011: 25.

46 Ibid.: 2.

lings is concerned, he does mention that his relationship with his sister in particular progresses over time. Towards the end of the novel he mentions how much he loves his sister, who has hugged him twice that day: "Two in one day! I really do love my sister. Especially when she's nice", he tells his addressee.[47] Additionally, he enters a relationship with Sam, who makes Charlie believe that he does matter and is in fact loveable. The reader does not learn whether or not he succeeds in becoming a writer, as the novel ends when Charlie is still a teenager.

In the epilogue of the novel, Charlie has a central realization, understanding how he has come to terms with living, with what Berlant discusses as a life shaped by crisis at all times.[48] After suffering from a nervous breakdown before having sex with Sam and slowly but surely remembering his aunt molesting him, "Charlie begins to come to grips with his repressed past, and he proposes to move on and change the direction of his life".[49] "When I fell asleep, I had this dream. My brother and my sister and I were watching television with my Aunt Helen. Everything was in slow motion. The sound was thick. And she was doing what Sam was doing. That's when I woke up. And I didn't know what the hell was going on."[50] Despite remembering that he was sexually abused as a child, Charlie is not defeated by his realization about his Aunt Helen, as indicated when he comes to the following conclusion:

> It's like if I blamed my aunt Helen, I would have to blame her dad for hitting her and the friend of the family that fooled around with her when she was little. And the person that fooled around with him. […] I'm not the way I am because of what I dreamt and remembered about my aunt Helen. That's what I figured out when things got quiet.[51]

In addition to understanding that it is not Aunt Helen's fault that he has had trouble fitting in and finding people like his aunt who express their love towards him, Charlie comments on having been unaware of other people's struggles influencing the attaining of their own happiness, as he was too focused on his own problems. Despite feeling unable to accept the love he has been given by the people around him, such as Sam, his outlook sounds positive and optimistic: "So, I guess we are who we are for a lot of reasons. And maybe we'll never know most of them. But even if we don't have the power to choose where we come from, we can still choose where we go from there. We can still do things.

47 Chbosky 1999: 184.

48 Berlant 2011: 57.

49 Matos 2013: 94.

50 Chbosky 1999: 218.

51 Ibid.: 228.

And we can try to feel okay about them."[52] That realization proves that Charlie has matured in the course of the novel and has gained an understanding of his surroundings, which has been primarily made possible through the act of writing. Berlant offers the following explanation, which also applies to Charlie's realization:

> Even when it turns out to involve a cruel relation, it would be wrong to see optimism's negativity as a symptom of an error, a perversion, damage, or dark truth: optimism is, instead, a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently.[53]

Having suppressed the memory of his aunt molesting him as a child ultimately does not cause Charlie to lose hope altogether. Cruel optimism can, according to Berlant, be thought of as a "mode of lived immanence" by people who "ride the wave of the system of attachment that they are used to, to syncopate with it, or to be held in a relation of reciprocity, reconciliation, or resignation that does not mean defeat by it".[54] Because he has become so accustomed to clinging to his aunt's memory, he is only able to detach himself when the shocking moment of remembering her sexual touching takes place and reveals the true nature of the relationship between himself and his aunt. In Charlie's journey of letting go of his past and disregarding the fact that he has been molested, the character of Aunt Helen takes on the role of Berlant's "powerful mute placeholder", who is "a silent, affectively present but physically displaced interlocutor", whose "convenient absence" has prevented Charlie from living the life he so desperately longs to live.[55] However, having reflected on the role of his aunt in his life, Charlie's conclusion proves the maturation he has experienced through addressing his personal development. Enduring that critical stage of learning about what his aunt did to him as well as surviving his first year of high school, which, as stated in his first letter, he was so afraid of, has made the flourishing of Charlie's new friendships and relationship with Sam possible. As Berlant sums up: "Any object of optimism promises to guarantee the endurance of something, the survival of something, the flourishing of something, and above all the protection of the desire that made this object or scene powerful enough to have magnetized an attachment to it."[56] In the end, Charlie tells his addressee of his unconditional

52 Ibid.

53 Berlant 2011: 14.

54 Ibid.: 28.

55 Ibid.: 25-26.

56 Chbosky 1999: 48.

love for his aunt, whose memory is discussed as powerful enough for Charlie to keep a magnetized attachment to. He forgives his aunt for what she did to him, as she is only *one* of the people who has made him the person he has become when he closes his last letter.

With aborting letter writing, Charlie furthermore lets go of the fear that made him start writing to his "dear friend" in the beginning of the novel: "And believe it or not, I'm really not that afraid of going", he says about starting his next year of school in the epilogue.[57] By that point, Charlie seems to have understood that the ordinary is "an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on".[58] "It is through the reflection in his letters, however, that Charlie finally comes to recognize that no one can live his life for him", Wasserman suggests.[59] "I think the idea is that every person has to live for his or her own life and then make the choice to share it with other people", Charlie concludes in one of his letters.[60]. In his last epistle he writes the following: "So, if this does end up being my last letter, please believe that things are good with me, and even when they're not, they will be soon enough. And I will believe the same about you."[61] Optimistic and having found the ability to believe in his ability to face his life from now on by himself, he lets go of writing to his "dear friend" and signs off ready to accept whatever the future might bring.

4. CONCLUSION

The novel ends with the climactic reawakening of Charlie's repressed past, with Charlie finally understanding why he has struggled with being the outsider and wallflower he has been characterized as throughout the novel. Matos claims that such moments of insight are a prominent characteristic of the Bildungsroman or coming-of-age novel. It is when "[the protagonist] feels a responsibility for change of heart and conduct" that characterizes the young hero's journey coming to an end.[62] The burden of his past is lifted from Charlie in a time that could be characterized as an impasse. While writing about having stayed at a mental insti-

57 Ibid.: 231.

58 Berlant 2011: 8.

59 Wasserman 2003: 51.

60 Chbosky 1999: 169.

61 Ibid.: 231.

62 Buckley quoted in Matos 2013: 94.

tution for a while, Charlie's last letter can be, according to Matos, thought of as the most emotionally charged in his series of epistles.[63] "A substantive change of heart […] does not generate on its own the better good life, though, and never without an equally threatening experience of loss", Berlant points out.[64] Clinging to his memory of his aunt is what ultimately kept Charlie from enjoying his life as a teenager, actively engaging in the social spheres he is part of. As the cruel notion of failing to understand why he feels so out of place outweighs his optimism for the greater part of his series of epistles, his clinging to his past is what Berlant discusses as the "survival scenario" that was the problem keeping him from attaining happiness in the first place.[65] By accepting this, while he is shaped by his suppressed childhood memories of his aunt, he understands that it is his choice to decide where to go from there, letting go of his past and having "the power to steer his life in another direction if he so desires".[66]

Eventually, the emotional sphere of the optimistic overshadows the cruel in Charlie's journey, characterizing his development as a shift typical for the coming-of-age novel. Matos claims that the passage of Charlie's realization as commented on above "marks a moment in which Charlie develops an awareness of his own *Bildung* [sic!] process".[67] This affirmative ending, a typical characteristic of the Young Adult novel, is made possible through Charlie's attachment to writing, which aids in the regaining of his emotional stability as well as his understanding of why he is both happy and sad, as he wonders in his first letter. The epistolary form serves as a crucial means of illustrating Charlie's personal growth and transformation from his point of view, which is only made possible through his continuous writing as well as reflecting on that writing and the effect it has had on him as a person. Charlie aborts his attachment to letter writing because he is no longer afraid to face his fears. While he claims that he is motivated to start writing out of fear of what his first year of high school will bring in his first letter, some of his wishes from his cluster of promises have been fulfilled: for instance, he has found the listener he lacks in his first letter in his group of friends. He affirms to the recipient of his epistles that even though he might not be where he wants to be just yet, he is optimistic that his development and growing sense of self-understanding will aid him in continuing his journey of selfhood.

63 Matos 2013: 95.

64 Berlant 2011: 48.

65 Ibid.: 49.

66 Matos 2013: 95.

67 Ibid.: 96.

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