

Charlie from *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

A passionate feminist myself, you may consider it surprising that I would glorify a piece of art for its *absence* of female empowerment. Yet, the protagonist of the novel-turned-film *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie, has earned my undying respect and reverence in the genre of young adult literature by redefining the fight for gender equality. It is not admiration for his resilience during trauma from childhood molestation nor for the companionship he offers to his friends confronting community backlash for homosexuality and abortion, but rather for the inherently *outstanding* qualities he possesses from being, as the title of the novel suggests, a wallflower.

As ruled by the Supreme Court in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case declaring race-based segregation of public facilities unconstitutional, 'separate' is inherently unequal. So, by focusing the attention mainly on females and their capacity for actions historically reserved for males, such as playing contact sports, pursuing science and mathematics, or simply cashing in a paycheck, history and the media seem to enforce an inequality in of themselves in their attempt to dislodge gender norms. Stephen Chbosky turns this tide of hardening the perception of the female, and instead sandpapers the *male* character down to its 'softer' and more 'plush' areas of emotional expression. More specifically, the teenager Charlie is not the normative image of masculinity, i.e. brusqueness, brawn, and athleticism. In lieu of merely gritting his teeth against obstacles such as a friend's suicide and sexual abuse by his aunt, how Charlie aims for keen self-reflection by keeping a journal and errs on the side of forgiveness over vengeance by empathizing with his aunt's difficult childhood is explained by the novel.

Also, from an early age, males are conventionally instructed to dust off a gravelly, bloodied scrape and act as the prince or savior for a helpless girl. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, the male is portrayed as more vulnerable, as Charlie accepts emotional guidance from a girl named Sam. This is not only a reversal of gender stereotypes, but also a unique answer to the lopsided approach of gender progressives to reform, in which gender equality is mainly propagated via the female 'route'. Rather than streamlining the goals and moral force of gender equality, this hinders their achievement. Unfortunately, consistent with Charlie's designation as a 'wallflower', these reversals are so subtle that they likely pass unnoticed by the lay reader. In the novel and film, Charlie's tenderness and sensitivity are slighted and overshadowed by the more pronounced, easily tangible conflicts that are likely integral to much of the story's broad-based appeal- teenage drug use and the cyclic formation, breakup, and suturing of relationships that teeter around sexuality.

Gender equality ought to be pursued by the toppling of female *and* male stereotypes in tandem. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* justifies and encourages this, as Chbosky emphatically allows readers to relate with Charlie despite the fact that his deficiency in stereotypical male-patterned traits is plain. Hence, Charlie's characterization supports the fluidity of not only society's constructs of gender and personality, but also the movements behind them.