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We Are Infinite:

Confronting High School Simulacra in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

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“Stephen Chbosky saved lives. No, not in the saving-a-cat-from-a-burning-building way nor performing the Heimlich on a little old lady at a restaurant. He saved lives by writing a peculiar little green book” (Aquino). *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* has become a phenomenon among adolescents in contemporary America. Passed on through recommendations for over 15 years, Charlie’s story has administered a sense of hope to the young people who read his letters. They say they relate to Charlie, that he makes them feel understood. For some, his story has saved their lives; at least two people have written to Chbosky to tell him that they gave up attempting suicide after they read his novel (Beckman). Several journalists have questioned Chbosky about his perspective on the book’s impact on his readers. He has replied with amazement, “‘It’s everything at once....It’s bizarre that a book would be that final barrier between life and death’” (qtd. in Beckman).

The storyline is simple enough. Charlie, a fifteen-year-old who is starting out as a freshman in high school, finds his way into a close-knit clique of seniors. Through those friendships, he learns about the joys that come with being a teenager and the horrors that come with growing up. His freshman year is overflowing with dozens of issues adolescents encounter. He processes these situations in nightly letters that he writes to an unknown character called “Friend” (*The Perks 3*). Adolescents read these letters, become Friend, and Charlie’s story changes their lives. Chbosky wrote his novel to give adolescents a source of hope in the midst of 1990s postmodernism. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Chbosky shows the damaging ramifications for adolescents who pursue Baudrillardian simulacra to formulate their lifestyles. Charlie functions as a Foucauldian author by both drawing awareness to his friends’ simulacra and coming to recognize his own simulacra in his idealized memory of Aunt Helen, an “image” that masks the fact that she was sexually abusive. Utilizing Charlie’s perspective, Chbosky

attempts to prove that adolescent friendship becomes a coping mechanism for dealing with simulacra. Friendship works as a coping mechanism because it both enables individuals to become aware of simulacra and gives them the recognition that they do not face simulacra alone. Chbosky does not deny that any sense of solidarity is temporary; rather, he encourages young people to use the progress of time to reach new moments of awareness about simulacra.

The adolescent age group underwent dramatic changes throughout the course of the twentieth century. One of the most tumultuous decades for adolescents was the 1990s, the decade in which Chbosky wrote his novel. Chbosky began writing *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* in 1994, and he finished and published the book in 1999; moreover, Charlie writes his letters to Friend from 1991 to 1992. In those letters, Charlie is responding to the atmosphere of the 1990s from an adolescent perspective, studying the environment in which he and his companions grow up.

The youngest members of Generation X were in their early twenties in the 1990s, and a new group nicknamed either “Generation Y” or the “Thirteeners” entered their teenage years (Rollin 312). For this generation, the end of the twentieth century brought about a conflicting message concerning what society expected of them. Carroll, who has studied the content of surveys given to adolescents in this decade, reveals, “they see themselves...more achievement-money- and college-oriented; growing up earlier, experiencing things earlier, being pushed into life stages sooner” (28). Despite the demand for adolescents to grow up faster, they still had limited control over the trajectory of their lives or their futures. These adolescents experienced a culture that both demanded they be adults and reminded them of their limited autonomy.

Several aspects of adolescent culture changed to influence the pressures placed on adolescents in the 1990s. For instance, the social aspects of the educational environment changed

with the inclusion of 98% of children in school (Rollin 325). The students attending school diversified as attendance increased. A fragmentation of individual interests and a growing diversity of the student population resulted in the “decentralization of the high school elite” (Oxoby 27). While high school students still separated into various social groups, those groups no longer existed in a hierarchy; rather, they formed status groups. Adolescents felt they had the freedom to find where they belonged rather than trying to be part of the singular “in” crowd. Moreover, specific groups began to feel more accepted by the others for their different lifestyles. One of these groups was homosexuals. The LGBT movement gained prominence because more adolescents were “coming out” about their sexuality and more people were supportive of the homosexual lifestyle (Rollin 344). Choosing friends became one of the only sources of autonomy available to adolescents, who felt too restricted by parents, teachers, and governmental systems (Milner 41). Overall, decentralization and acceptance helped adolescents feel in control of their own decisions. This decentralization left room for “alternative” groups to develop; Milner describes these groups as cliques whose members resisted the appeal of popularity (41). Status groups were a source of power for teenagers, and they brought about a diversity of interests for the young people who belonged to them. When adolescents had increased responsibilities but could not gain their own authority, they used friend groups to maintain a sense of control. Their cliques changed the appearance of schools as well as adolescent culture in the 1990s.

Media and technology also altered adolescent culture in the 1990s. These commodities exploited adolescents by promoting products and lifestyles that appealed to teen interests but offered them no legitimate autonomy. Advertisers discovered a new fan-base in adolescents and began to target them for their marketed products and lifestyles (Oxoby 54). One of these products was music, which became diverse enough to serve individual interests. As adolescents

began to personalize their music interests, FM radios, CD players, and headphones became more popular (Rollin 319). Outside of music, other forms of entertainment caught adolescents' attention. Adolescent comedy shows provided a source of entertainment for them (319). Furthermore, the Internet was a growing phenomenon, and adolescents were able to use the Web to browse different products and fads that interested them (323). The Internet was also an additional space in which marketers could advertise products to adolescents; thus, it became both a source of freedom and a source of exploitation. Technology and media both restricted adolescent autonomy and offered them an illusion of freedom.

Media contributed to a change in risk behaviors among adolescents. Not only did these behaviors become more prevalent in the 1990s, but also they became more public. In the 1990s, surveys showed that 80% of people lost their virginity in high school (Oxoby 34). Adolescents were having sex earlier and with more people, although they claimed that their sexual encounters came out of stable, emotional relationships (Rollin 344; Oxoby 34). Sexual promiscuity led to other issues. For instance, more date rape occurred among adolescents in the 1990s than in previous decades (Oxoby 34). Furthermore, nearly 25% of sexually active adolescents contracted a sexually transmitted disease (STD), and cases of teen pregnancy increased. One third of all girls who had an unplanned pregnancy ended up having abortions (Oxoby 35). The sex culture of the 1990s demonstrates mature experiences adolescents had at young ages, even though they were not prepared to handle the consequences of their actions.

Using drugs and alcohol was another risk behavior in the 1990s. In many ways, the media encouraged this lifestyle. After analyzing some of the popular commercials from this decade, Oxoby concludes that advertising was a "thinly veiled invitation to underage drinking" (54). Enjoying a mature lifestyle became a source of rebellion for adolescents. The risk behavior of

alcohol led to further problems, such as drinking and driving (Rollin 341). Cigarettes were popular, but adolescents also used marijuana and other illegal drugs (Rollin 340). These risk behaviors, coupled with violence, show the ways in which the adolescent culture of the 1990s became a tumultuous time of freedom and restriction for the adolescents who experienced it. Overall, several aspects of culture contributed to the conflicting message of the need to grow up and the inability for adolescents to have responsibility over their own lives.

Charlie, in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, watches and experiences the elements discussed about the adolescent culture of the 1990s. He also comes to understand the struggle between meeting expectations and having a limited autonomy. First, Charlie experiences the changing social culture of high school. He has been raised to see high school as a hierarchy, as evidenced by his surprise when he first meets Brad, the quarterback: “I guess when you see somebody in the hallway or on the field or something, it’s nice to know they are a real person” (34). While Charlie’s school has a popular crowd, he soon learns that the majority of the school exists in Milner’s status groups. He discovers the decentralization of friend groups through Sam and Patrick, who embrace their unpopularity. Charlie’s friends are the alternative group Milner describes, and they are one group among many. Charlie tells Friend that Patrick “used to be popular before Sam bought him some good music,” but Patrick never gives the impression that he feels sad over losing his popularity (43). He also never shows shame for his sexual orientation. Patrick sums up the diversity of status groups in high school when he asks, ““You ever think, Charlie, that our group is the same as any other group like the football team? And the only real difference between us is what we wear and why we wear it?”” (155). Through this conversation and others, Charlie realizes decentralizing high school hierarchies gives everyone the freedom to find the friends that help them express themselves.

Charlie experiences not only the social changes of adolescence but also the lifestyle phases that come with being a high school student. His friends express their individuality through the music they listen to, and they introduce him to the genres that they enjoy on FM radio and cassette. They feel offended when one of their favorite artists is insulted. For instance, one night in the Big Boy Charlie listens to a heated debate among several of his friends over the media's portrayal of Kurt Cobain (104). In addition to new music genres, Charlie gets his first taste of smoking, school dances, and masturbation from spending time with his new friends. He goes to parties, learns about sex, and sees the repercussions of bad reputations. Charlie experiences several of the lifestyle phases embraced in the 1990s.

Charlie also encounters the risk behaviors of adolescents. For instance, Bob gives him marijuana and a "brownie....But this was not an ordinary brownie. Since you are older, I think you know what kind of brownie it was" (35). Charlie also has a bad trip on LSD that lands him in the hospital, and he has to see a therapist afterwards. Alcohol appears at several of his friends' get-togethers. Charlie also tells Friend that he has seen a statutory rape, but "Sam...explained about all the things you have to go through to prove [that a rape happened], especially in high school when the boy and girl are popular and in love" (32). On top of all other risk behaviors, Charlie's friend, Michael, committed suicide when they were in eighth grade, and Charlie has not come to peace about Michael's death. This list of situations addresses how adolescents were experiencing grownup issues without the maturity to understand them or to make wise choices about them. Charlie experiences the complicated risk behaviors of 1990s adolescents, struggling to find freedom amidst the exploitation.

Additional areas of adolescent culture that Charlie experiences are the expectations of adults and the pressure of fulfilling a specific ideal. Brad, Patrick's boyfriend, experiences the

heavy pressures for achievement from his dad, who expects him to get a football scholarship. He cannot be honest about his sexuality because his dad has a certain heterosexual ideal for him. Mary Elizabeth is another character facing parental expectations. She has tattoos and piercings, a style that clashes with the luxury of her home and her parents. Her self-expression shows that she has responded in a negative way to her parents' expectations; instead of following their wishes, she chooses to rebel against their standards. Charlie sees the pressure his own siblings feel over the need for scholarships to go to college, since his parents cannot afford to send both of them. His brother spends all of his time playing football to earn a scholarship, and his sister is second in her class, getting the full ride she needed to attend school. Charlie knows he will have to work for an academic scholarship, as well. Moore says that parental expectations stem from a desire to see their children succeed (259). However, because Charlie almost never looks at life from an adult's perspective, his voice only captures the response of the adolescent who feels the pressure and responds in kind. Through Charlie's many encounters with the good and bad sides of high school, Chbosky captures a detailed, hyperbolic image of the 1990s adolescent culture he is writing to in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*.

Oxoby describes the issues of the 1990s as built upon a "poor self-image" (Oxoby 26). While more adolescents felt accepted in high school, they also believed the larger culture did not understand their personal struggles (27, 40). They felt a "nihilistic pointlessness," a product of the postmodern culture in which they lived (29). This culture, which promised to give adolescents more freedom and independence from previous generations, seemed for some reason instead to leave them apathetic, angry, and emotionally detached. Charlie is present in these same circumstances, and Chbosky attempts to help adolescents in the 1990s through his novel.

The first place to begin to understand the complexities of 1990s adolescent culture is to look at the philosophical movements driving culture at the end of the twentieth century.

Undergirding American culture in the 1990s was postmodernism, a movement that insisted on the absence of truth and the futility of any pursuit of the “real.” One theorist, Jean Baudrillard, presents a philosophical interpretation of culture based on postmodern principles. In his analysis of culture, he attempts to explain why humanity behaved as it did. His conclusions speak to the conflicting messages of expectation and oppression felt by adolescent culture the 1990s and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*.

To begin his evaluation of postmodernity, Baudrillard explores the notion of the “sign,” a concept developed by Plato and consisting of a signifier— a word or phrase used to describe something— and the signified— the thing that the word describes (“For a Critique” 91). Ideally, every signifier would always refer to the same signified, stabilizing the sign. That stabilized sign is an example of a “transcendent signified,” or a known truth. However, Baudrillard argues that there is no transcendent signified. Thus, he suggests that the concept of truth has disappeared in contemporary society. Truth (or, more accurately, the “real”) has disappeared over time as increases in capitalism and technology have convinced individuals to believe in falsifications of reality. These fabrications are “simulations” of what the “real” would be. From his belief in the absence of the transcendent signified Baudrillard constructs a theory centered on the world’s simulations.

Baudrillard’s theory of simulation consists of three orders of simulacra. Before these orders developed, people could discover truth. In history, Baudrillard argues, the “real” still existed because art represented it accurately. When individuals created art, they made it true-to-life. As time progressed, humanity created the first order of simulacra, which distorted the truth

that was originally apparent in art and images. Artistic freedom embellished a realistic image with fantastical additions like halos on saints or lambs in Christ's arms. History continued to move forward, and a new generation of people created the second order, which describes art that masks the truth it is supposed to depict. In this stage, art mocks the "real" by falsifying its presentation. Artists distorted truth to the point where the image that was supposed to show something about the "real" altered the original message to communicate a certain refutation to its truth. The final, third order of simulacra has developed out of recent history. This order masks the fact that there is no truth left. Art and its related elements create a simulation instead of a reality, constructing lifestyles without foundations ("The Precession" 1560). These three orders of simulacra form the foundation of Baudrillard's theory and feed into all other parts of his argument as he seeks to prove that contemporary society has no foundation in truth and experiences only empty images created by culture.

Recognizing the explosion of simulacra over the last few decades, Baudrillard examines how his ideas appear in contemporary culture. "In the end," he concludes, "the image and the reading of the image are by no means the shortest way to the object, merely the shortest way to another image" ("Advertising" 193). This barrage of objects appears in capitalism, where financial industries pursue customers with the relentless attraction of consumerism and conspicuous consumption ("The System of Objects" 11). All of the notions of satisfaction promoted by consumerism lack any foundation in a "real." Therefore, Baudrillard asserts that nothing can fulfill the desire humanity has for material gain; trends, behaviors, and lifestyles pass in rapid succession without promoting any sense of purpose or meaning. These movements will always prove to be a simulation, and "the image is more important than what it speaks about" because what it speaks about does not exist (*Why Hasn't Everything* 49). Since contemporary

businesses seek to exploit customers through marketing insufficient commodities to them, Baudrillard believes that consumerism has succeeded. Even though humanity knows that materialism is unsatisfying, they continue to pay tribute to consumerist culture (“Advertising” 194). Simulacra has led to a world where nothing can last, thus creating a never-ending space in which capitalism can supply a new image and make a larger profit. Contemporary culture thrives on the third order of simulacra, consuming images void of the “real.”

The best example of society consuming images that do not satisfy appears through advertising. Since advertising works with image, Baudrillard sees it as the best example of simulacra at work today. Baudrillard states, “Society puts itself on display and consumes its own image” (“Advertising” 188). Advertising harnesses human desire, enslaving it to the overwhelming number of products that promise satisfaction. In the end, the image is more satisfying than the actual product. Oxboby reveals how advertising allowed for the decentralization of target audiences in the 1990s (47). Because of this fragmentation, advertising can “adapt to the individual himself, personally” and offer different products and pictures for the person’s distraction and enjoyment (“Advertising” 184). Advertising not only perpetuates the threat of simulacra in contemporary culture, but also it draws its energy from small groups, producing more images that still have no “real” foundation.

Today, the “real” does not exist, and culture manufactures images. While people think that they can find the “real” among the hallucinations and illusions presented in culture, Baudrillard argues that there is no “real” left: “Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible” (“Simulacra and Simulations” 177). Culture, suffocated by technology and the proliferation of appealing images, has no solution for itself. Baudrillard says humanity is too late; everything is simulation.

The adolescent age group of the 1990s experienced the simulations to which Baudrillard's theory refers. They were nicknamed Generation Y, a title that created a pun on the common question facing postmodernity: "What's the point?" (Oxoby 29). These adolescents encountered simulacra and grew up knowing that their culture was a fabrication. The lifestyles fed to them through several sources of simulacra set them in battle against Baudrillard's world.

As stated previously, simulacra are most threatening in consumerism and the pervasiveness of materialism. Miles draws attention to the Internet and global market, which exposed adolescents to an even wider range of simulacra. He calls adolescents of this decade "consumers of *cultures*" because they explored a variety of lifestyles without committing to one of them (66). Several scholars have concluded that consumerism is a big threat for adolescents because it commodifies them. Milner says that adolescents are targets for commodification because they are willing to try new things; they are susceptible to fads and phases in a way that encourages them to shift from one simulation to another (160). MTV is the perfect example of how culture promotes a lifestyle to adolescents that those young people then adopt as their own (Oxoby 37). Furthermore, Brooks argues that while culture pretends to empower youth, it commodifies the group and encourages them to pursue more simulacra (6). From the postmodern perspective of the absence of a "real," people might as well pursue whatever lifestyle or craze attracts them the most. However, as Baudrillard would say, without a "real" the structures of these lifestyles will be unsustainable. The superficiality of culture will eliminate the ability of those participating in it to find a committed purpose in life or to find a simulation that satisfies them. Simulacra accompany the struggle between expectation and limited autonomy by making a future that seems attainable and then showing it to be nothing but a mirage. Adolescents, then, must learn to "put up with [the simulations] in exchange for [the market's] advantages...in order

to cope with ravages of structural-culture uncertainty” (Miles 159). In the 1990s, consumerism, with a façade of progress, threatened the existence of adolescents by feeding them simulations that would lead them to failure.

Scholars conclude that some adolescents can respond to the capitalist market in a negative way. For instance, rather than seeking solutions to their problems or freedom from oppression, teenagers could turn to apathy and ignore postmodern culture (Oxoby 26). Adolescents could also allow institutions to manipulate them through several forms of simulacra; unfortunately, giving over control would propitiate the cycle of simulation (Brooks 8). On the other hand, Miles and Moore believe that adolescents who feel like they cannot reach the “American Dream” will “resist anything” and turn to negative behaviors instead (Miles 60; Moore 257). These negative behaviors include the risk behaviors of sex, drugs, and alcohol discussed by Rollin and Oxoby. In addition to these responses, scholars fear that adolescents’ knowledge of simulation could lead to cynicism. Moore proposes that newer generations who encounter postmodern society will suspect everyone and believe in nothing (258). They can have what he calls an “aggressive indifference” toward life, believing that “nothing really matters” (257, 261). Scholars agree that these apathetic and cynical attitudes are dangerous because they exhibit a passive and inactive response to society’s promotion of images. However, scholars suggest that adolescents could approach culture in a more positive way.

Excluding the possibility of a nuclear apocalypse, Baudrillard argues that one should cope with simulacra by adopting it to one’s own identity, which is a pattern of behavior scholars witnessed in adolescents in the 1990s. They believed adolescents had the ability to harness simulacra and create fluid, semi-individual identities. Baudrillard calls this coping mechanism a “precarious freedom—indeed, of the ultimate freedom, mainly the freedom to choose the objects

which will distinguish one from the other people” (“Advertising” 199). Because simulations are all people have, they can utilize different types of images to distinguish their identity from others. Miles states, “Social structures are imposing meaning on young people, which they then adopt as their autonomous identity in an attempt to escape the emptiness of consumer society” (159). Oxoby affirms that many times in the 1990s, adolescents began to experiment and gain a perspective on life through their own experiences, which in turn influenced their identities (37). These scholars conclude that the best way to deal with simulacra is to attempt to operate within the simulations to form a unique identity, though temporal and lacking the “real.”

Due to the constant presence of simulacra and the inability to escape postmodernism, adolescents must learn to deal with images in one way or another. Miles articulates the struggle by showing the paradoxical powers of consumerism: “Young people are therefore liberated and constrained...at one and the same time—[consumerism] provides them with a canvas, but the only oils they can use to paint that canvas are consumerist ones” (85). His statement reveals the limited autonomy available to adolescents during their development. Even in a culture void of truth, adolescents have some ability to create their own personalities. Miles argues, “Young people use their lifestyles, which on the surface appear to be garmented or ‘post-modern’, as a highly rational and modernist way of stabilizing their everyday lives” (159). Based on these characteristics, the adolescent generation of the 1990s could avoid apathy by finding ways to utilize Baudrillard’s theory in their lives.

Baudrillard’s theory appears in the adolescent environment of Chbosky’s novel. Charlie’s observations of adolescent culture reveal that the elements his family and friends pursue are simulations. He sees the lies behind the images and lifestyles they adopt. Most importantly, Charlie sees the world differently than those around him, and he addresses issues

others ignore. Thus, Patrick is accurate when he says, ““He’s a wallflower”” (37). Chbosky uses Charlie to reveal simulacra to his audience, thereby assisting adolescents in understanding how society has commodified them and distracted them with simulations.

Charlie is aware that life is an image and that simulacra controls culture. He expresses this awareness at one point through a fearful realization of the absence of the “real.” He explains to Friend, “None of it seems real....It happens really fast, and things start to slip away....I see nothing....I start to breathe hard trying to see something, but I can’t” (74). He has the awareness that culture is fabricated, and he draws attention to the work of simulacra. Through the rest of his letters, he begins to define the images and simulations attracting those around him.

Charlie addresses several Baudrillardian ideas as he takes in the adolescent culture that surrounds him. At first, he recognizes a sense of disillusionment among his peers concerning security in life. They mask this dissatisfaction with an illusion of contentment. In Charlie’s eyes, even happiness becomes an image that adolescents pursue to ignore reality. When Charlie looks at the students in his high school, he tells Friend, “I wonder if anyone is really happy” (24). By asking this question, he suggests that the way people look on the outside is an inaccurate representation of how they feel on the inside. Despite his curiosity about how adolescents really feel, he affirms the idea that appearance is more important than reality, admitting, “I was glad that everyone seemed as happy as they seemed” (36). This evaluation of happiness reflects the analyses of Brooks and Moore, who believe adolescents recognize how fabricated life has become; consequently, adolescents can articulate the fact that the “real” no longer exists. Charlie’s description of his post-LSD experience gives a great illustration of a response to a world created from simulacra: “The trance happens when you don’t focus on anything, and the

whole big picture swallows and moves around you” (102). Charlie shows how overwhelming simulacra are, proving how disillusionment can make even happiness a simulation.

Charlie examines simulacra when considering the tabloids, magazines, and other sources of media he finds. When reflecting on the people who appear in magazines, Charlie tells Friend:

I think it’s nice for stars to do interviews to make us think they are just like us, but to tell you the truth, I get the feeling that it’s all a big lie. The problem is I don’t know who is lying....And I don’t know why the ladies in the dentist’s office like them as much as they do. (15)

By drawing attention to the lies in magazines, Charlie reveals print media to be a source of simulacra. Patrick tells Charlie why girls read them: ““They’re copying their moms and magazines and everything to know how to act around guys”” (23). His statement shows that adolescent girls use magazine images to build their identities. They are examples of adolescents who utilize simulacra to recreate themselves into ideal images. Charlie also cannot understand the models who appear on the covers of the magazines. He complains, “Each one had a smiling face, and every time it was a woman on the cover, she was showing her cleavage. I wondered if these women wanted to do that to look pretty or if it was just part of the job” (117). He sees the superficiality behind the photographs, recognizing that the girls who pursue these ideals are chasing after simulations created by consumerism. Magazines illustrate simulacra all adolescents would recognize, so readers can consider what is absent behind the images they encounter.

While elements of Charlie’s letters reflect on products and advertisements found in culture, he spends most of his time studying the people in his life and their response to simulations. For instance, his sister and brother demonstrate the presence of simulacra in their lives by pursuing lifestyles that hold no definite future. His sister begins her journey through

several stages of recognizing and understanding simulacra by pursuing the image of the Earth Day Club. She appreciates the club because it gives her the feeling of being capable of changing the world. However, instead of changing the world, she just tells Charlie that eating off napkins is “bad for the environment” (10). Charlie recognizes that his sister wants to make a difference and a larger scale, but he knows she cannot do that through Earth Day Club because it is a high school club with a small outreach; its effectiveness is a simulation.

Charlie also sees how his sister uses meanness as a form of protection against commitment in a relationship; when she stops being mean, she is vulnerable to simulacra. She is dating a boy from the Earth Day Club (“I won’t tell you his name. But I will tell you all about him” [10]) whom she keeps at a distance through her meanness. However, when her boyfriend hits her, she closes the distance between them and falls for a simulation. That simulation is the level of commitment they will have with one another. Charlie’s sister demonstrates that the commitment she has to her boyfriend has become her simulation by continuing to see him. Charlie tells friend, “She says she’s been seeing this boy secretly since Dad said she couldn’t....She says they’re going to get married after they both finish college....And she said not to worry because he won’t hit her again” (49). His sister’s infatuation with her boyfriend has escalated into an obsession with simulacra that is convincing her that their relationship will last a lifetime. Like all images, the simulation of his commitment to her will not last. At the winter formal, Charlie sees his sister’s boyfriend leave her on the dance floor when she tells him she is pregnant. When the boyfriend walks away, he shows that he does not intend to spend his life with Charlie’s sister, thus proving that his commitment to her is a simulation. Charlie sees the devastation his sister feels when she realizes the boyfriend is simulacra. After she tells him what has happened, Charlie takes her to get an abortion so that she can be free from the pain her

boyfriend's simulation has caused her. Before her story ends, she makes sure to give a simulation back to her boyfriend; Charlie says, "she told her ex-boyfriend that the pregnancy was a false alarm, and he wanted to get back together, and she said no" (130). Thus, her ex-boyfriend never learned that the baby had been "real." Through her senior year of high school, Charlie's sister sees that efforts to change the world are limited and illusive, as is love and commitment in the face of life's difficulties.

Charlie's brother does not experience the trauma of his sister, but he does have his own simulation in football. In fact, most of Charlie's stories about his brother include football at some point. His brother has constructed an identity out of the sport. Charlie's family believes in his football simulacra as well. His mom's family usually fights, but on Thanksgiving they decide to watch Charlie's brother play football. Charlie tells Friend, "in that moment when my brother took the field...everyone was proud. At one point, my brother made a big play on third down, and everyone cheered" (59). His brother's football career is a simulation that gives their family a sense of community with each other. However, Charlie knows from his dad's experiences with baseball that sports are not permanent lifestyles; the natural human body cannot keep up with the spectacle. Charlie also knows that college, not football, is the opportunity his brother has that other family members do not (59). When Charlie's brother cannot play football anymore, he will have to find a new simulation on which to construct his life. He proves images lack permanence in the "real."

Charlie sees more simulacra at work in high school. For instance, he sees simulations at the school dances, where he wonders, "how many couples will dance to 'their song'" (23). He is observing the simulation of adolescent love. When those young couples adopt a specific song—described by Oxoby and Rollin as a source of identity for adolescents in the 1990s—they try to

create a more permanent image of their high school relationship. By questioning the legitimacy of “their song,” Charlie reveals the lack of the “real” love and commitment behind adolescent infatuation. When he is not at school dances, Charlie goes to parties and describes for Friend the ways others absorb the simulacra of drugs, alcohol, sex, and music. The atmosphere of a party is one of distraction because it encourages the adolescent to ignore the complexities of growing up by just having fun. However, Charlie knows how dangerous parties can be. He sees it on the night he witnesses the rape, and he hears about it in the stories Patrick tells of blunders high school students have made in the past. Charlie shows that partying can be a negative reaction to simulacra. As Moore and Miles describe, these negative behaviors can come as a response to the pressures culture administered on adolescents in the 1990s (Miles 60; Moore 257). As Charlie looks to those around him in high school living for the simulacra that most interests them, he proves that large portions of adolescent life are images constructed by culture to distract them from an absence of anything “real.”

Another aspect of adolescent culture that Charlie proves to be a simulation is popularity. He sees through his old friend Susan that popularity offers a false sense of security to those who pursue it. As Milner suggests, teenagers attempt a level of autonomy by choosing their friends. Susan attempts to gain autonomy by abandoning her friendship with Charlie and making an effort to become more popular. Charlie describes the change he sees in her from middle school to high school: “over the summer she had her braces taken off, and she got a little taller and prettier and grew breasts. Now, she acts a lot dumber in the hallways, especially when boys are around” (6-7). By watching her transformation, he sees how she is attempting to construct an identity from the images of popularity promoted to her in culture. In order to become this new person, Susan has to abandon her old identity. Charlie says, “It was like she didn’t want to remember

what she was like twelve months ago and she certainly didn't want the boys to know that she knew me and used to be my friend" (144). Her pursuit of popularity, however, leaves her surrounded by a simulation of security that deconstructs when high school social status is no longer important. Moreover, it provides an insufficient center because it exists in images. Charlie recognizes that she "doesn't look as happy" (7). He can see that the image she is pursuing has failed to satisfy her. Popularity has failed to give her a sense of purpose; for her, it is a simulation adapted to identity to distract from insecurity, despite its inability to satisfy.

Charlie also observes simulations at work in his friends Patrick, Sam, and Mary Elizabeth. Charlie discovers Patrick's struggle with the futility of simulacra through Patrick's relationship with Brad. Before the breakup, Brad is Patrick's simulation. He is an image of an ideal boyfriend both for his social status and for his growing willingness to explore his sexuality. Patrick agrees to keep their relationship a secret because he believes that what they have together is "real." He demonstrates this belief in his conversations with Charlie by calling their sexual encounters "mak[ing] love" (46). However, Brad has chosen to create a heterosexual lifestyle for himself to accompany his social status. He fulfills the stereotypical role of the high school quarterback to the point of dating a cheerleader. In keeping his homosexual orientation a secret, he makes the image of himself his "real" identity. Thus, in order to preserve that image, he ends his relationship with Patrick and chooses his heterosexual simulacra instead. He makes the decision to embrace his heterosexual exterior when he calls Patrick a "faggot," disengaging himself from Patrick and from his homosexuality by utilizing a homophobic term (151). He, in effect, makes his homosexuality a simulation because he chooses the identity of the heterosexual quarterback over Patrick. Patrick must come to terms with the fact that Brad can never be a

“real” boyfriend because Brad has chosen to make himself someone other than who Patrick wanted him to be.

After he and Brad break up, Patrick tries to fill his life with other simulacra that cannot satisfy him. He becomes what Charlie calls “glazey[sic] and numb” (156). Patrick tries driving, music, alcohol, caffeine tabs, drugs, sex, and even kissing Charlie to fill the void left by the absence of his relationship with Brad. In pursuing other simulacra, Patrick is distracting himself from the fact that nothing he does has a purpose. Charlie understands that Patrick is experiencing disillusionment from discovering the simulation of his romantic relationship. “Whenever I saw him around anywhere,” Charlie informs Friend, “he didn’t look like he was there” (150). However, Charlie also knows that Patrick is losing his whole identity in other lies, too. Patrick recognizes the futility of simulacra but pursues it anyway, and Charlie sees how destructive simulations can be when the individual has realized that life and love are nothing but simulacra.

Sam is another character for whom love serves as a larger example of simulacra. When she was a little girl, her father prostituted her to his business partners. When she started high school, she gained a reputation for being a “blow queen” (49). Through these stories, Charlie sees that Sam has already become disillusioned about love and relationships. However, she thinks she has found true love when she starts dating Craig. Craig is an older man who Sam believes will offer her stability. She sees him as “‘the one’ and...she [i]s trying to think of ways to keep it going long-distance while she [i]s at school” (178). Sam idealizes Craig, believing in the socially-constructed notion of a “soul-mate” and planning to build her future around their combined lives. Craig becomes her simulacra.

As Charlie studies this relationship, he suspects that Craig is not genuine. From the beginning Charlie notices, “Craig doesn’t really listen to [Sam] when she talks” (48). Charlie

knows that Sam has idealized their relationship, but he suspects that Craig is pretending to feel the same way. One of Charlie's last letters reveals that Craig not only does not listen to Sam, but also he is unfaithful to her. While Sam thought he was "the one," Craig proves that his affections are a mirage covering his true character. Charlie hurts for Sam because he knows Sam believed in Craig's simulation. The lie of their relationship affirms to her and Charlie that people have the capability to create their own convincing simulation to mislead others around them.

Despite the evidence of simulacra in these different people, Mary Elizabeth is the best example of a high school student aware of her limited autonomy and creating her own identity out of simulacra. She has a belly button ring and a Zen tattoo, and she "has been a Buddhist since July" (42). She is forming an identity out of some of the globalized simulacra marketed to her. She writes *Punk Rocky*, the countercultural magazine that coincides with the performances of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* by her and her friends. Charlie also describes her as "wear[ing] her hair to make somebody mad" (47). She has a self-developed personality created to fight against the standard simulacra targeted at high school students, yet the lifestyle she chooses is still an image. When Charlie has his first date with her, he tells Friend, "I learned a lot about 'objectification,' Native Americans, and the bourgeoisie" (114). While these words speak to societal construction and control, the compilation of them in a random list shows how these elements are not "real." Moreover, the list demonstrates how Mary Elizabeth understands the jargon but may be unable to express her understanding. Mary Elizabeth takes Charlie to an "'art' movie," which Charlie cannot understand (124). She also shows him "'real' alternative music" at the record store (125). She demonstrates the commodification of the adolescent by showing how susceptible she is to trying new simulations. She also attempts to gain autonomy by voicing her opinion, just as Brooks says adolescents did in response to culture in the 1990s. Mary Elizabeth

has made it a goal in her relationship to “expose [Charlie] to all these great things” (129). While she is trying to give him a larger awareness of the world, she also exposes him to her simulacra. Mary Elizabeth knows the language of power; she is aware of the impact of a status quo, and she resists it. This utilization of her autonomy demonstrates the level of control scholars hope adolescents achieve. However, her lifestyle is a mirage still infiltrated by simulacra.

Mary Elizabeth not only constructs her identity from simulacra, but also she believes Charlie is a person who understands the world from her perspective, and she creates a false image of him for herself. Their relationship reveals that Mary Elizabeth does not understand Charlie. When she shares books with him, he complains that she “ask[s] me very long questions that [are] really just her ideas with a question mark put at the end” (128). She seems to be searching for affirmation about her own opinions; however, she does not know his opinion and becomes like Patrick and Sam, believing her boyfriend is someone he is not. Charlie cannot be her ideal mate because he has not achieved her level of understanding about culture. Moreover, his role as a wallflower restricts him from pursuing a self-constructed identity. While Mary Elizabeth at first assumes that Charlie will support her attempts to harness simulacra, he cannot assist her in this way because he is still learning about simulations. Mary Elizabeth believes in an image of Charlie, revealing her ongoing battle against culture’s simulacra.

Mary Elizabeth’s second boyfriend, Peter, better fits her perception of someone who understands the world as she does. Charlie tells Friend, “I overheard Mary Elizabeth say to Alice that she was much happier with Peter because he was ‘opinionated,’ and they had debates. She said that I was really sweet and understanding, but that our relationship was too one-sided” (154). Peter is already older and familiar with simulacra and its presence in culture. He and Mary Elizabeth have a good relationship because they both seek autonomy among the simulacra

culture produces. Charlie's observations of Mary Elizabeth best capture the issues of Baudrillard in the 1990s. She recognizes her own commodification by culture and fights it by creating an identity she perceives as her own, voicing a counter-opinion (with the help of Peter) against the simulacra she tries not to pursue.

A final element important to consider in relation to Chbosky's novel is that Charlie is himself an image. He is most obviously a fifteen-year-old character created by an adult author. One expects this in a fiction story. What is not expected is a narrator who does not use his "real" name. Charlie's first letter begins with this remark:

[Y]ou 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 didn't enclose a return address for the same reason. I mean nothing bad by this.

Honest. (2)

Charlie creates a persona to tell his story, drawing attention to the influential power and control simulacra can have even in literature. Upon this premise, Charlie's entire collection of letters becomes an image. Even as Charlie tries to discover why people pursue aspects of life that hold no truth, he subjects Friend to the same thing. Adolescents who read the story, then, must recognize that Charlie is a simulation and then choose whether or not to let his conclusions influence their identity.

Chbosky drags all of his characters through several simulated lifestyles, drawing attention to the complexity of commodity and culture facing adolescents in the 1990s. Charlie's task of witnessing simulacra in others is tantamount to understanding his character and his impact on adolescents who engage with his story. However, while Charlie is watching and learning from those around him, he is also experiencing simulation in his own life, and his letters record his

discovery of that image. Baudrillard does not account for those who make an effort to reveal simulacra. Therefore, in order to understand Charlie's role in the midst of simulacra, one must examine one of Baudrillard's fellow philosophical theorists, Michel Foucault, whose theory offers an explanation for Charlie's role in his own story.

Michel Foucault, another theorist attempting to communicate through postmodernism, is associated with New Historicism in literary circles for his analysis of how culture constructs the individual. Like Baudrillard, he agrees that postmodern culture and the progression of society have caused the "real" to disappear. However, in contrast to Baudrillard, he sees society at work to construct the individual through the utilization of external forces: power vectors and discourse. Vectors are the avenues society uses to survey humanity and codify it; discourse inculcates behavior into individuals. Foucault states that no one can escape these sources of power because they operate on the individual continuously. Humans naturally exist in society and receive effects from it one way or another. Thus, social construction is unavoidable. However, individuals who can become aware that culture is creating them can gain a sense of momentary autonomy. Foucault argues that individuals need to realize what influences them in order to experience a semblance of freedom.

Several scholars who interact with adolescent culture and Baudrillard suggest that Foucauldian awareness of simulacra is necessary for this age group to find stability in society. They emphasize the fact that adolescents are capable of recognizing the simulacra that affects them. For instance, Brooks focuses on the ability of adolescents to communicate their feelings and ideas: "young people are more than capable of offering opinions and critiques of the ways in which they are represented" in culture (13). In addition, Miles says that young people adopt "increased independence, self-determination, and self-realization" (68). They have a desire to

achieve an awareness of how society controls them through simulacra. This analysis exemplifies the importance of Foucault's concept of awareness for the adolescents of the 1990s.

The most important aspect of Foucault's theory in regards to Charlie and his journey through *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is that of the purpose of the author, or the author-function. The author-function is what Foucault calls the relationship of an author to the texts he creates. According to Foucault, texts exist within a complex postmodern discourse that both operates on and emanates from the author. The author is not the only voice in his text; instead, he communicates through his own social construction. Foucault argues that culture has transformed writing into "an interplay of signs, regulated less by the content it signifies than by the very nature of the signifier" (1477). The chaos created by the absence of a transcendent signified makes the content of a text as flickering and floating as the words that make it up. Writing today is such that the author himself has disappeared, his voice becoming one among the multitude of cultural influences at play around that individual.

In spite of the diversity of forces operating on a text, Foucault suggests that an author can utilize a text to reveal a series of power vectors and discourse to the reader. The author's name "characterizes a particular manner of existence of discourse" (1481). The author, therefore, has a distinctive voice even though other voices operate on it. With this perspective, an author must explain "the presence of certain events within a text, as well as their transformations, distortions, and their various modifications" (1484). He is responsible for drawing attention to the power vectors at work in culture as he processes them himself. The author must find a foothold among the "plurality of egos" in order to offer awareness of social construction to his reader (1484). Overall, the author is one voice amidst the rest, speaking as a single authority even as other authorities are acting on him and his creation.

Based on Foucault's perspective, Charlie seems to be an example of someone functioning within postmodern discourse. Mike Cadden addresses this idea in his evaluation of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Cadden argues that because Charlie functions as a single narrator in a double-voiced discourse, he leaves his reader free to determine what is true. Cadden focuses his conversation on Foucault, analyzing Charlie from the perspective discourse. However, a more thorough analysis of the text comes from a marrying of Foucault's discussion of an author to Baudrillard's simulacra as it operates in and through Charlie and his friends. Charlie, the protagonist and first-person-immediate narrator in this text, serves as the Foucauldian author who draws attention to the Baudrillardian simulacra in his friends' lives while at the same time working through the simulacra influencing him personally.

Charlie has an author-function that establishes him as capable of revealing the necessary information about simulacra to his audience. Charlie's author-function is a freshman who is just beginning to understand the world of Baudrillardian simulacra. As seniors, Charlie's friends have knowledge of culture that exceeds his, as exemplified by their ability to introduce him to so many new things. Simulations control their lives, but their engagement with simulacra does not discount their seniority over him. After all, Baudrillard proves that even if one recognizes simulacra, one cannot find any "real" with which to replace the images in one's life. Charlie is still learning about the lack of "real" in culture. Charlie's youth gives him the ability to discover the truths he is revealing over the course of the novel. As a Foucauldian author experiencing the ramifications of a Baudrillardian society, Charlie must first reveal simulacra at work on culture, which is captured in his observations of the simulacra his friends experience, discussed previously. Next, one must consider how Charlie comes to recognize simulacra at work on himself.

As a Foucauldian author, Charlie wrestles with how his current situations affect him and why. He is struggling to see what drives him and what it is that he pursues subconsciously. In his letters, he discusses his efforts to “participate,” a term Bill, his English teacher, uses to describe what he wants Charlie to learn throughout the year (24). However, Charlie seems unable to do so because he does not understand himself or how his circumstances cause him to act the way he does. At one point, Charlie’s sister calls him a freak. He tells her plainly, “‘I’m trying not to be’” (26). Recognizing his inability to function as others do in the midst of simulations makes him desperate to understand what is guiding his trajectory in life. In response to his sister and his feelings of insecurity, he begins the whole project of trying to figure out, essentially, why he is who he is. He knows there is something “wrong” with him (137). What he has not realized is that he is subconsciously pursuing simulacra, which is affecting his identity. His letters reveal what that simulation is. However, until he understands the simulacra, he cannot understand himself. At one point, he cries out, “I just wish God or my parents or Sam or my sister or someone would just tell me what’s wrong with me. Just tell me how to be different in a way that makes sense. To make this all go away. And disappear” (139). His lack of understanding leaves him fearful because he cannot explain his own behavior. Thus, Charlie functions as a Foucauldian author because he is trying to understand his simulacra and how it defines his personality.

Charlie struggles with a few elements of simulations for himself throughout the book, including his crush on Sam and his smoking habit. However, he seems to be aware of these simulations because he regrets liking Sam and knows he should not be smoking. These two images cannot be the ones that are holding him back from participating. Therefore, the most significant simulation for Charlie is his false memory of his friendship with Aunt Helen. Aunt Helen shows up in Charlie’s first letter when he says that she is “my favorite person in the whole

world” (5). He also calls her his “best friend” (7). In his mind, Aunt Helen is the ideal companion he needs in order to face life’s difficulties. Her muddled story reveals Charlie’s pursuit of the memory of his aunt, the “image” that is controlling him subconsciously.

Charlie’s understanding of Aunt Helen's past and death complicate his memory of her. First, she had a rough life. Charlie says, “My aunt Helen drank a lot. My aunt Helen took drugs a lot. My aunt Helen had many problems with men and boys. She was a very unhappy person most of her life” (90). Her story leads Charlie to view her as an innocent victim. He feels he should never complain about his own life because “Some people really do have it a lot worse than I do” (6). Because he perceives her as a victim, he idealizes her as someone who needed comfort and was willing to give it. Their relationship is also complicated because she died in a car accident during a snowstorm on her way to pick up his birthday present. After sharing this story with Friend, Charlie says, “I know that my aunt Helen would still be alive today if she just bought me one present like everybody else. She would be alive if I were born on a day that didn’t snow” (92). He feels responsible for Aunt Helen’s death. Due to his feelings of guilt, Charlie idealizes both his aunt and his relationship with her. He does not realize it, but his guilt creates false images of Aunt Helen in his mind. Because he is still dealing with the guilt throughout his letters, Charlie perceives Aunt Helen as the ideal he creates her to be.

Charlie’s unhealthy attachment to the simulation of his aunt appears through his continued efforts to have a relationship with her. He spends his time in his letters trying to keep an image of her alive, even though she cannot be “real” because she has passed away. He visits her grave throughout his first year of high school when he wants to feel better or when life feels overwhelming. When he has a hard day, he always wishes Aunt Helen could have been there; he sees her as the person who will always understand. Charlie has created an ideal image of his best

friend, a simulation that drives his decisions in his current situations even though he does not recognize her as an example of simulacra.

Although Charlie still feels attached to Aunt Helen, his simulation of her begins to reveal itself during his time with his new friends. At first, Charlie seems able to find a balance between spending time with her and getting to know his new friends. Instead of moving on and choosing living friends over Helen, he visits Helen's grave and tells her about his experiences with his Sam and Patrick and the others. However, as his time with his living friends increases, his time with Aunt Helen decreases. When he is dating Mary Elizabeth, Aunt Helen's presence goes quiet, thus suggesting that his new friends are taking precedence over this old one. It seems that he may have moved past Aunt Helen's memory and chosen to embrace friends in the present. Unfortunately, he loses all of his present friends when he kisses Sam. Their absence leaves him chasing the image of Aunt Helen again. Consequently, his time away from her has brought more awareness than he realized because her memory is not as comforting as it used to be. He tells Friend, "for the first time in my life, [visiting Aunt Helen] didn't help" (139). He now recognizes that friends he can interact with are better than his memory of his aunt. Aunt Helen cannot assist him in the present, so his image of her as the ideal best friend begins to deconstruct.

While Charlie has discovered that Aunt Helen cannot satisfy his desire for companionship, Charlie realizes that the memory of his aunt is a simulation when he and Sam attempt to consummate their relationship. Sam's sexual act reminds him of the abuse administered by his aunt when he was younger. Their intimacy causes Charlie to have a dream that reveals a different side of Aunt Helen than he has remembered: "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" (204). When he

first wakes up, he cannot figure out which memory is the simulation. After all, a dream is a perfect example of a constructed image. It is only later, as he is writing one of his last letters, that he admits, “I’m starting to feel like what I dreamt about [Aunt Helen] last night was true” (205). He begins to question the image he has of her and whether it preserved the “real” Aunt Helen. Eventually, Charlie realizes that “it happened every Saturday when we would watch television” (209). He confirms that his aunt’s friendship is a simulation masking a reality that contradicted the images he had in his mind of her. She was not a good friend, and she hurt him more than she helped him. Like all third-order simulacra, his image of her perfect friendship masks the fact that there was never good friendship between them at all.

Realizing the truth about Aunt Helen reveals the image that has shaped Charlie’s existence, and he is able to name the simulation that has prevented him from being able to “participate.” This realization completes his function as a Foucauldian author. Charlie uses his letters to reveal the simulacra at work on his friends; at the same time, he reveals the simulacra working on him. He proves that his writing cannot exist in a vacuum; other forces act upon it even as he creates a space for himself in his letters. Charlie’s introspection draws attention to the simulacra of Aunt Helen at work; his unique voice offers a dialogue on postmodern culture that demonstrates awareness of its control. He also desires for others to seek further understanding. When Charlie names his Aunt Helen as the source of his simulacra in his letter, he challenges his readers to gain the same awareness about their own simulacra.

While Charlie realizes that his aunt abused him, he does not let this memory dictate his entire identity. He chooses not to blame her because, in his mind, he would have to accuse the first abuser for starting the progression. He concludes that he would have to blame God “for not stopping all this and things that are much worse...it [does not go] anywhere. Because it [i]sn’t

the point” (211). Charlie tackles the heart of Foucault by admitting that something has affected him, but he cannot change it or blame others for it. As Baudrillard says, he has succumbed to the simulacra. Charlie clarifies his point for Friend by showing how one cannot blame a single simulation for someone’s entire identity:

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. And I think that’s important to know. It made things feel clear and together. Don’t get me wrong. I know what happened was important. And I need to remember it. (211)

In this passage, Charlie is communicating the idea that adolescents can learn to control which simulations they allow to affect their lives. Charlie, like Foucault, does not deny that exterior forces alter the individual’s autonomy. Charlie also does not deny the allure of simulations and false images; he succumbs to one that has placed him in the hospital several different times. Rather, he embraces Foucault’s solution—continuous awareness of culture’s simulations enables him to experience a sense of autonomy even within social construction.

Charlie learns that society controls individuals through the presentation of simulacra in the form of ideal behavior, lifestyles, and relationships. He also discovers what Foucault has communicated: one must become aware of the cultural construction surrounding the individual in order to achieve any sense of autonomy. In his last letter, he states:

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. And we can try to feel okay about them. (211)

At fifteen, Charlie realizes the impact culture has on his own well-being and his inability to alter all of that influence. All one can do is seek awareness and try to move forward toward a chosen identity formed from simulations the individual pursues.

Charlie's letters reveal simulacra to the adolescents who read them. However, he does not adhere to the pessimistic conclusion of Baudrillard. Rather, he affirms a cultural reality of adolescents in the 1990s. He suggests that friendship can serve to augment the individual's awareness of culture's simulacra, therefore extending the individual's autonomy. Friendship is not a permanent solution, but it is what Chbosky sees as a good option for temporary relief from the pressures of simulacra.

By confirming that he and his friends feel isolated in a world that seeks to exploit them, Charlie gives people the feeling that ““Even though you feel like you're the only one going through it at the time, everyone has at one point or another”” (qtd. in Hare). Chbosky has affirmed that the point of his book is to make his readers feel like they belong somewhere; he has a desire to see individuals helping one another. When asked about the power of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* to save lives, Chbosky expresses remorse that his book made people feel like they belonged when he had hoped that other people would be the source of that sense of belonging (Beckman). Chbosky does not care as much about the effectiveness of his book as he does about individuals reaching out to one another and offering dependable support. That support, he says, is necessary for anyone living in the current culture: ““It is a way of coping and it's a way of surviving. It's a way of getting through”” (qtd. in Topel). Friendship and its accompanying sense of belonging bring Charlie the escape he needs to face the future with courage. By emphasizing the importance of adolescent friendship, Chbosky suggests that teenage solidarity works to augment the necessary awareness that Foucault promotes. Solidarity works,

based on Charlie's letters, because it enables adolescents to realize that they are not the only ones struggling against Baudrillardan simulacra. While Chbosky suggests that a sense of togetherness will alleviate the innate confusion of a Baudrillardan society, he admits it is a temporary solution; in fact, he encourages his readers to see friendship and awareness as temporary because teenagers need to utilize the progression of time to achieve awareness in the future.

Chbosky's solution to Baudrillardan simulacra finds support in facts of adolescent friendships in the 1990s. Milner states that the peer groups in which an adolescent is involved are "often crucial to understanding why teenagers act the way they do" (13). Friends have a strong impact on an adolescent's behavior and perception of the world. Moreover, Carroll points out that parental roles decrease during adolescence, while peer influences increase (26). Adolescents perceive their parents as too authoritative, but they have some autonomy in choosing and engaging with people their own age. Consequently, Milner states, "the impact of peers seems to outweigh the impact of family influences in shaping economic and occupational goals and opportunities" in the adolescent years (21). Thus, adolescents value peer friendships more than family relationships. The substance of these friendships is also important. Stringer states, "Teens in middle adolescence place a strong emphasis on keeping confidences, being loyal, and being trustworthy—qualities that add a poignant intensity to friendships" (31). These qualities become critical when the culture that surrounds adolescents is untrustworthy and constructed by images. In many ways, adolescent friends offer escape and support for each other through the trials of discovering culture and its influence on them.

In order to propose that friendship is the best way to cope with postmodernism, Chbosky proves that family is a poor coping mechanism because it emphasizes the obligation of commitment over willful inclusion. His situation demonstrates Stringer and Milner's conclusions

about the decreased importance of family in adolescents' lives. In Charlie's family, "everyone loves each other, but no one really likes each other" (56). This statement demonstrates the obligation family members feel toward one another, even as they resist spending time together. Charlie's family demonstrates the diminishing role of parents and siblings in adolescent life by their being mentally and physically unavailable. In everyday life, Charlie struggles to find a sense of belonging among his family. One scene in particular captures Charlie's struggle to feel a meaningful connection with his family:

I started reading [*Naked Lunch*] when I got home, and to tell you the truth, I don't know what the guy is talking about...so I went downstairs to watch television with my sister....[S]he just told me to shut up and leave her alone...so I decided to do my math homework, which was a mistake because math has never made sense to me....So, I tried to help my mother in the kitchen, but I dropped the casserole, so she told me to read in my room until my father came home....Luckily, my father came home before I could pick up the book again, but he told me to stop "hanging on his shoulders like a monkey" because he wanted to watch the hockey game....I couldn't stop asking him questions...and he was "resting his eyes"....So, he told me to watch television with my sister, which I did, but she told me to go help my mother in the kitchen, which I did, but then she told me to go read in my room. Which I did. (107-8)

He is searching for a mental connection with his family members, but they are too distracted to offer him the attention he needs. Charlie has a place with his family, but it is a prescribed place, and they spend time with him out of duty. Otherwise, they are mentally distant. Beyond these mental disconnects, Charlie's family is also physically unavailable; Charlie says the only person

who hugged him in his family was Aunt Helen (22). By not demonstrating their love for him through touch, Charlie's family shows a physical distance from him that disengages him from intimacy with them. To bring the two types of distance together, Aunt Helen shows a mental and physical disconnect for Charlie. She further proves an issue with family as a coping mechanism because she has hurt Charlie emotionally and physically when she sexually abused him. Consequently, most of Charlie's family members have hurt other family members in some way. Through the failure of Charlie's family to assist one another consistently, Chbosky proves that family cannot serve as good comforters in the face of simulacra because their association with one another relies on obligation.

While his family does not offer ideal companionship, Charlie proves that friendship is a necessity for an adolescent to feel comfortable in the world of simulacra. In his first letter, he says, "I just need to know that someone out there listens and understands....I need to know that these people exist" (2). More specifically, he says later, "It would be very nice to have a friend again" (21). In a world where nothing is "real," Charlie feels the need to find someone who is tangible. He finds such people in Sam and Patrick, who make him feel important from the first time they hang out at the Big Boy: "The nice thing about the Big Boy was the fact that Patrick and Sam didn't just throw around inside jokes and make me struggle to keep up. Not at all. They asked me questions" (19). As their relationships grow, their stories enable him to see the simulacra in their lives as well as his own. Thus, their solidarity assists in his awareness of simulations in culture. Charlie also reveals to Friend how important friends are for feeling stable in the midst of simulacra. After his relationship with Mary Elizabeth ends and his friends desert him for a time, he admits to Friend, "I don't know how much longer I can keep going without a friend. I used to be able to do it very easily, but that was before I knew what having a friend was

like” (144). During this time of separation, he pretends to have friends and talk to them while he drives, but that does not work. He cannot achieve comfort and awareness if his friends are not there. After the cafeteria fight that returns Charlie’s friends to him, Charlie tells Friend, “that was enough” (154). Despite the reality that simulacra are at work on him and everyone else, Charlie finds enough comfort in the knowledge that he is not alone to continue to seek awareness.

Friendship has the purpose of making Charlie feel like he belongs. After Charlie reads the suicide poem to his friends at the Christmas party, he describes the looks he gets from Sam and Patrick as “I think they knew. Not anything specific really. They just knew” (66). They become aware of a point where Charlie felt vulnerable and they want to show him that they understand. By doing so, Charlie’s friends make him feel like he belongs. Through their acceptance of him and his troubles, he becomes aware that others see life as complex and painful, too. That feeling of belonging enables him to have confidence and peace about circumstances as he moves forward. In one of his last letters, he has a flashback to a time when Sam and Patrick helped him feel like he belonged:

The time we were walking. Just the three of us. And I was in the middle. I don’t remember where we were walking to or were walking from. I don’t even remember the season. I just remember walking between them and feeling for the first time that I belonged somewhere. (198)

In this memory, Charlie cannot remember anything but companionship. It is that feeling of belonging that allows him to enjoy life despite the bleakness of reality. Having friends gives him the support he needs to face the realization that culture has presented him with simulacra. He wants to spread that sense of belonging, which he demonstrates through his concern and hope

that everyone around him is “okay” (66). Therefore, Charlie proves that a sense of belonging can give adolescents courage to embrace the awareness that life is simulation.

Charlie’s relationship with his new adolescent friends proves that Chbosky sees the best kind of friendship as being a physical presence that comforts but does not create simulacra. Charlie’s time with Patrick demonstrates the difference. When he spends time with Patrick after Patrick and Brad break up, he lets Patrick kiss him goodnight “[b]ecause that’s what friends are for” (161). However, because he is not attracted to Patrick, letting Patrick kiss him creates a simulation of physical intimacy between them. Patrick does not overcome his disillusionment over Brad by kissing Charlie. In contrast, he grows stronger when Charlie supports him by riding around with him. Charlie tells Friend how he administers this comfort:

It’s hard to see a friend hurt this much. Especially when you can’t do anything except ‘be there.’ I want to make him stop hurting, but I can’t. So, I just follow him around whenever he wants to show me his world. (161)

Charlie has no monumental solution for Patrick, but he makes Patrick feel like he belongs by “being there.” His presence as a companion for Patrick is legitimate because he wants to support his friend in the midst of overwhelming simulacra. Significantly, on the night Patrick does not kiss Charlie, Patrick “just thanked me for being his friend” (164). By emphasizing the power of “being there,” Chbosky proves that the most effective way to comfort those struggling against simulacra is to be a comfort and support who attracts a sense of awareness.

The ability to give friendship and to offer a sense of belonging promotes an answer to Chbosky’s now famous line, “we accept the love we think we deserve” (24). This line illustrates a simulation because a person is receiving what they perceive to be love from another individual. They choose to believe that the image they receive is “real.” This statement illustrates

the problem with how Charlie, his sister, Patrick, Sam, and Mary Elizabeth perceived their relationships with other people; they were accepting something that was not “real.” In response to these broken relationships that develop from accepting simulations of love, Charlie proves that it is better to give the love he thinks the other person deserves. Giving love reveals the power of friendship to assist in coping with postmodernism and its manifestations in high school. Because Charlie creates the friendship that he offers to his companions, he makes that friendship real for himself. Furthermore, because Charlie can give his friends solidarity, they can cope with the rest of the world in fragmentation and are able to give him the same support. Companionable support them gives them the courage to cope with the lack of the “real” in life. Speaking to a generation fragmented by media, commodification, and Baudrillardian simulacra, Charlie knows what this culture feels like and demands that his readers choose solidarity over solitude. Through him, Chbosky proves that life becomes bearable when one has friendship.

Baudrillard and Foucault would argue that Chbosky’s solution of friendship is another image or another aspect of discourse and therefore fails to promote a lasting solution to postmodernism. Ironically, Chbosky agrees. He does not deny that simulations reproduce over time and moments of awareness are impermanent, thus agreeing with the two theorists. Instead, Chbosky suggests that a feeling of friendship at specific moments gives adolescents the chance to “com[e] to peace with where [they]’ve been and then [to choose] where [they] want to go” (Topel). Chbosky makes time an unthreatening part of his answer to Baudrillardian simulacra by showing how Charlie acknowledges its presence. Time, for Charlie, is a matter of fact. Charlie talks about growing up a lot and has no notion of staying young forever (29, 93). Charlie also shows an awareness of time by drawing attention to people who are in different life stages. When he visits the mall, he sees people of all ages at the food court: “Old men sitting alone. Young

girls with blue eye shadow and awkward jaws. Little kids who looked tired. Fathers in nice coats who looked even more tired” (144). These observations demonstrate his awareness of life’s progression. Charlie also emphasizes the temporality of awareness by directing attention to good and bad days:

I try to remind myself when I feel great like that that there will be another terrible week coming someday, so I should store up as many great details as I can, so during the next terrible week, I can remember those details and believe that I’ll feel great again. It doesn’t work a lot, but I think it’s important to try. (103)

He sees good days as a source of comfort because they give him the ability to believe that sadness is also temporary. At one point, Charlie tells Friend, “things change. And friends leave. And life doesn’t stop for anybody” (145). He is unafraid to admit that friendships, including the one he has with Sam and Patrick, will not last forever. Charlie does not deny the fact that his solution to his problems—his sense of belonging and companionship—will not be permanent. Even in his immediate future, he cannot deny that time progresses regardless of the methods of coping a person develops to face postmodern culture.

Friendship can augment awareness of simulacra for limited time; those specific moments give adolescents a desire to seek awareness again. Charlie defines these times of awareness combined with the comfort of friendship in one word: “infinite” (33). The first time he feels infinite is when he, Sam, and Patrick hear “this really amazing song about a boy” (33). Their friendship in that moment helps Charlie in particular recognize the reality about culture at work in the song. Charlie calls this moment “infinite” because the issues of society come into focus and the solidarity makes him feel as though he is part of something universal. The second time that Charlie feels infinite is when Sam is standing in the truck as they drive through the tunnel to

downtown. They experience solidarity by being together in the cab of the truck, and the awareness is present in how Charlie describes the tunnel. Just as he and his friends start at one side of the tunnel in darkness, disappear in the middle where “you think you’ll never get there,” and then “fly out of the tunnel onto the bridge,” Charlie and his friends manage to break into Foucauldian awareness when they are together (192). The tunnel moves Charlie and his friends toward the lights of the city, and their friendships with each other move them toward awareness and a sense of infiniteness. The final time Charlie feels infinite is when he is standing in the tunnel. Describing the experience, he tells Friend, “I was crying because I was suddenly very aware of the fact that it was me standing up in that tunnel....I was really there. And that was enough to make me feel infinite” (213). He could finally recognize his new level of awareness about culture with the help of his friends. Thus, “infinity” represents the sensations adolescents feel when they are both aware of culture and surrounded by friends. Friendship is temporary and so are those moments of awareness; however, when one is giving love and recognizing simulacra at the same time, the moment of awareness feels complete because it can draw the complexities of culture into focus.

Charlie affirms the connection between the benefits of friendship and an acceptance of the reality of time in his last letter. He writes it on the night before his first day as a sophomore, which he will spend alone because all of his friends have graduated. He had been alone on the first day of his freshman year as well. However, he ends his first and last letters differently. In the first letter, he says, “The reason I wrote this letter is because I start high school tomorrow and I am really afraid of going” (6). Then, in his last letter, his tone changes: “Tomorrow, I start my sophomore year of high school. And believe it or not, I’m really not afraid of going” (213). These parallel statements show how Charlie’s awareness of the simulacra that construct him and

his feeling of belonging with his friends frees him to face the incoming simulacra without fear. Friends cure the pessimism he experiences when he sees the world as overwhelming: “even when [times are not good], they will be soon enough” (213). By ending his novel this way, Chbosky leaves his reader with the idea that friendship can heal wounds and bring courage in the face of simulacra, even as culture moves forward.

While Chbosky offers adolescents the coping mechanism of solidarity and accounts for the problem of time by encouraging them to embrace temporality, he does not solve the long-term issue of postmodernity. Solidarity is good, and moments of awareness are important, but they will never satisfy humanity. Friends and awareness do not fix culture’s fragmentation; they only attempt to work within it. Perhaps this is why Charlie ends his final letter only “believ[ing]” that Friend will be okay (213). However, while one must be aware that Chbosky has not solved the issue of postmodernism, the overall impact of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* on adolescents still stands; he still saves lives. Adolescents read it not to overcome simulacra, but to find hope in knowing others struggle against it, too: “We teens have a lot on our minds, but we don’t often say half the things we are thinking. Charlie says everything he thinks, and this assuages my fears and helps me know that I’m not alone” (Locke 27). While created to comfort those coming out of the fragmentation of the 1990s, Charlie’s battle for the good of adolescent culture continues. In print and on the silver screen, Charlie affirms the “perks” that come with being a wallflower by voicing adolescent concerns of disillusionment and exploitation in the wake of postmodernism. He tells his readers to escape those simulations that oppress them, to “participate” in the images they enjoy, and to continue searching for a sense of belonging. Nothing will last because nothing is “real,” but as Chbosky says, “what the hell. There’s always tomorrow” (“Introduction” ix).

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