

**Reassessing Puberty and Culture
in Contemporary Bildungsroman Novels:
*English Music and The Perks of Being a Wallflower***

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the intersection of puberty and culture in the contemporary Bildungsroman novels *English Music* by Peter Ackroyd and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky through the lens of Cultural Studies and Identity Theory. It explores how cultural contexts and societal norms shape the protagonists' experience of adolescence influencing identity formation. By analyzing the cultural and social influences depicted in these novels, this paper highlights how each protagonist navigates the challenges of adolescence, including identity crises and cultural expectations. Further, the study argues that, uprising in dissimilar cultures with different circumstances affects young protagonists' mentality and worldviews. Thus, through a qualitative comparative analysis of the Anglo-American Bildungsroman novels, the paper sheds light on the intermixture of puberty and culture and how this mixture influences the young protagonists' development, identity formation, mental growth and self-development. Despite they belong two different cultural and social backgrounds, both novels reveal the universal and unique aspects of coming-of-age, illustrating how cultural identity influences personal growth and identity formation.

Keywords: bildungsroman, adolescent protagonist, cultural identity, comparative analysis, mind growth, puberty, tradition.

Introduction

The emergence of the Bildungsroman genre in modern novels, as shown in *English Music* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, defies the conventional notions of character development and reveals intricate themes of mental growth and identity. Though humans have long told tales of growing up, Bildungsroman as a distinct literary form initially found in Germany around the beginning of the 19th century. Bulger (2017) said that "Bildungsroman was initially considered as a work of educational as well as philosophical value for young adults" (45). According to Hawthorne Jeremy, the appearance of Bildungsroman is connected to "the growing interest in the theme that 'the child is father to the man' which accompanies the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century interest in the young"(2005, 22). Bakhtin (1986) defines the Bildungsroman as "that provides an image of man in the process of becoming". Jeffrey L. Sammons "a novel about the moral and psychological growth of the main character" (1991).

Argyle (2002) regards *Bildung* as, "a special type of development in its stress on the hero's conscious effort and on the manifold aspects of human endeavor, it is distinguished from education in its stress on the hero's interior motivation and goal". According to Bulger, "Bildungsroman has the connotation of a specific and well-defined literary tradition" (2017, 78).

This paper examines how puberty, culture, and identity formation interact in the Bildungsroman novels *English Music* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by utilizing the lens of Cultural Studies and Identity Theory. This theory enables a thorough investigation of the ways in which societal norms and cultural settings influence the adolescent experiences and growth of the characters. It investigates the ways in which individual and societal identities are shaped and influenced by cultural environments. It views literature as a cultural artifact that both mirrors and questions power structures,

conventions, and values in society. The said theory explores how American cultural norms, media, and social interactions create the protagonist's experiences of youth and self-discovery, and how British cultural components, historical allusions, and societal expectations impact the protagonist's journey and identity creation.

The terms "novel of development" and "novel of formation" are used frequently and interchangeably. Furthermore, the development contrasts from *Bildung* or "formation," which is the more relevant term to apply to novels classed as *Bildungsroman* from a diachronic perspective on the novelistic genre regarding character representation tactics (Golban 2018, 8). Despite having its roots in Germany, the formation novel quickly spread throughout Europe and then the entire world. After Goethe's masterpiece was translated into English by Thomas Carlyle and published in 1824, other British authors were inspired to produce their own novels. It originated in Germany and expanded throughout the world in the 20th century, including to Britain, France, and other nations (Buckley 1974, 57).

It is a genre that concentrates on the psychological and moral maturation of the young protagonist from infancy to adulthood, in it, temperament change is so significant, Bakhtin explains this genre as:

Opposed to a static unity, here one finds a dynamic unity in the hero's image. The hero himself, his character, becomes a variable in the formula of this type of novel. Changes in the hero himself acquire plot significance, and thus the entire plot of the novel is reinterpreted and reconstructed. Time is introduced into man, enters into his very image, changing in a fundamental way the significance of all aspects of his destiny and life. (1986, 21)

Cultural Inheritance

Literature is always "a useful means for expressing social and humanistic values. Literature and culture interact because culture is present in a variety of contexts, including traditions, ideas, and most importantly, human views" (Akhter and Lamba, 2022, 2).

It captures events that take place in society and daily life. It covers a variety of topics, including the individual experiences of humans, nature, conflict, culture, and history (Revathy 2020, 82). Whenever culture is mentioned, literature appears because culture is, metaphorically speaking, a set of feelings, thoughts and emotions, so literature plays different and important roles in shaping culture. Literature serves as an illustration point of studying cultural phenomenon. Literary works can also play a prominent role in understanding foreign culture via historical, linguistic and social performances. Literature of teenagers is writing for and about teenagers, written in a stylized, simplified manner, excessively didactic, and naturally shorter than a true novel. It's an important transition. However, it goes much beyond that. It concerns tensions between the claims of the individual and those of civilization; it is about life, its histories and potentialities, transformations and choices (Proukou 2005, 62).

In *English Music*, Ackroyd has tried to show the solid connection between his own English culture with the growth of the protagonist. *English Music* is proved to be a

model of English culture that emphasizes inclusivity, progress, and tolerance of tradition. Its protagonist takes the past as a stanchion for the present and future. He is a sensitive boy, troubled by dreams and haunted by the past of his country, England. Timothy is also the source of the power that helps his father perform psychic healings. He is an organic unity between the past and present. Timothy, in a series of dreams, finds himself wrapped up in famous English writers' works in art, literature and music. Three actual historical figures—Charles Dickens, William Byrd, and William Hogarth—appeared in Timothy's dreams. Dickens, the king of nineteenth-century melodrama, combined story lines from his works in his dream in a surrealistic way. Both Tim's visions about Byrd and Hogarth center on hypothetical English aesthetics lessons. As a result, rather than a deep involvement with sketching out historical causation or relations, the actual history and biography in these dreams mostly serve as an inspiration for costume, atmosphere, and dialogue. The *Great Expectations* is the most frequently appeared in *English Music* allusions and references, because, according to Ackroyd "it centered on the meaning of the past which imbued the present like a stain" (Trimm 2011).

On the other hand, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* follows an introverted and observant child, Charlie, during his freshman year of high school, Charlie is shy, yet witty and curious of the world around him. He starts writing letters as a means to deal with starting high school, the thought of doing it alone frightens him. Once he starts high school he connects with his English teacher, Bill, who motivated him to read books and stories, such as *Side of Paradise*, *The Catcher in The Rye*, *Patrick On the Road*, *Naked Lunch*, *The Stranger*, *Peter Pan*, and *A Separate Peace*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Hamlet*, *Walden*, and *The Fountainhead*:

Bill gave me one book to read over the break. It's *The Catcher in the Rye*. It was Bill's favorite book when he was my age. He said it was the kind of book you made your own. I read the first twenty pages. I don't know how I feel about it just yet, but it does seem appropriate to this time. (Chbosky 2009, 75)

Monaghan (2016, 39) maintained that "*The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is more than just a collection of letters or a memoir of a troubled adolescent. Instead, the world that Charlie paints in his letters to his friend is a reflection of the numerous difficulties and confusions that a typical adolescent could experience during their freshman year of high school". His letters are incredibly effective at evoking empathy because they portray the situations and people he meets with a startling level of reality. On the other hand, although having every right to complain, he never does. Ultimately, the entire book provides a robust and illustrative written record of the protagonist's thoughts, leaving it up to the readers, who are the recipients of his letters, to evaluate the significance and use of his words (Matos, 2013).

Struggle of identity of the protagonists

Golban argued that, "the relations between the individual and society or reality are those of rebelliousness escapism, the latter usually in the framework of the romantic dualism

of existence” (17). Timothy Harcombe's story is told in a sequence of props that he dwells inside narratives and settings inspired by well-known classical English authors, including Daniel Defoe, William Blake, and Charles Dickens, using tropes that are closely related to postmodern fiction. The novel, however, upholds a firmly conservative history of white male English artist, as opposed to an eclectic style that is usually connected to the celebration of variety and a recognition of contingency. The work received a lot of early criticism for the discrepancy between style and ideology.

In *English Music*, the characters are determined by a mysterious historical power, and their lives are molded by this force. Those who are driven by external influences, social or historical, are not depicted in it. Ackroyd refuses to return to an earlier conception of the subject and does not describe humans who are "subject to" (Roessner 1998) a physical force; the book rejects, for instance, a crude economic determinism theory in which the fate of the characters is determined by their class. Instead, the book presents an ideal picture of English tradition as an unavoidable spiritual power that shapes the characters' vocations, loves, and neuroses and is reflected in British art. Ackroyd establishes his own trend by writing a dreamlike novel. He infuses his fiction with such lyrical sympathy that we become entangled in the web of hybridization and experience its most positive side—the side that mellows without perplexing our souls and brains (Vianu 1999, 186).

Charlie in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* addresses an anonymous friend and uses generic names for the people he mentions for the sake of anonymity. He reveals the loss of his friend Michael Dobson to suicide and the hurt he still feels over the loss of his favorite aunt Helen eight years prior. Since he makes several references to popular culture throughout his writings, these letters play a very crucial role in shaping his mature identity.

According to Wasserman Emily (2003), *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* makes an effective use of the epistolary genre to provide readers a close-up look at two young adults' battles with identity and self in a perplexing and frequently frightening environment. Hawthorne stated, “the novel gives the reader a sense of intimacy, accessing the narrator’s voice on a personal and confessional level”(2005).

A 15-year-old high school student who wrote *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* under the alias "Charlie" to a friend whose identity is never revealed. The reason Charlie writes the letters, as he explains to the recipient, is that "I just need to know that someone out there listens and understands and doesn't try to sleep with people even if they could have." He claims that in order to prevent the reader from discovering his identity, he will refer to persons by alternative names or "generic names" (Karolides et al. 2011, 391-393).

Protagonist’s fantasy

Timothy is portrayed in dreams sequences that pertain to his distinct personality, which he perceives but never fully comprehends as a more genuine representation of his father's existence. Ackroyd makes the suggestion that we are all part of culture and offers a chain of asides embracing notorious figures from English literature, music, and

art. Ackroyd bemoaned the erosion of English culture during the twentieth century, and more notably after World War II. The realistic idiom of the Bildungsroman is said to be problematized in order to break it open and reject its totalizing claims, and English music is argued to be primarily a representative of that identity. It offers the vision of an aesthetic plurality that is based on the diffracting powers of romance (Ganteau 2000).

Timothy did not attend school, he was educated by his father at home. The fundamental subject of Mr. Harcombe's lessons has been what he calls "English music" -- "by which," Mr. Ackroyd tells us, "he meant not only music itself but also English history, English literature and English painting." (Bulunuz 2015). The cultural writers of English tradition and their works are as familiar to Timothy as London streets. Clement, Timothy's father, edifies him during discussion about English art, culture and music:

Instead we discussed what he used to call 'English music' by which he meant not only music itself but also English history, English literature, English painting. With him one subject always led to another and he would break off from a discussion of William Byrd or Henry Purcell in order to tell me about Tennyson and Browning; he would turn from the work of Samuel Johnson to the paintings of Thomas Gainsborough, from pavans and galliard to odes and sonnets, from the London of Daniel Defoe to the London of Charles Dickens. And in my imagination, as he talked, all these things comprised one world which I believed to be still living-even in this small room where we sat. It was a presence around both of us, no less significant than the phantom images which I sometimes glimpsed in the old hall. He had taken on the task of educating me, as I discovered later, and so there was a method in everything he said. (Ackroyd 1992, 21)

Akroyd uses rich and vivid imagery to describe the experience of learning from past authors. A living link to the past is established through the mention of "phantom images" and the realistic depiction of various historical eras. This contributes to the idea that culture and knowledge are living, breathing things that have an impact on the present.

In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, the source of culture and knowledge is Charlie's tutor, Bill, he invites Charlie to read a set of stories, read poems, asks him to watch a group of movies and even edifies him with what philosophy is through the novel, *The Fountainhead*, which focuses on the belief of Individualism. Bill is the link between Charlie and culture:

So, I just explained to her how Bill gives me special books to read outside of class and how *To Kill a Mockingbird* was the first one. And how it was special to me[...]. Bill gave me *Hamlet* to read for the break. He said I would need the free time to really concentrate on the play. I guess I don't need to say who wrote it. The only advice Bill gave me was to think about the main character in terms of the other main characters in the books I've

read thus far. He said not to get caught up thinking the play was ‘too fancy’. (Chbosky, 133-134)

Then Chbosky pays homage by having his protagonist ‘Charlie’ read several cultural and historical books and stories. He found himself sincerely bound with what he reads and listens. Charlie has a special connection to some of his favorite authors, including like: Scott Fitzgerald, Salinger, Kerouac, Harper Lee, Shakespeare and Ayn Rand, etc.:

In the last month or so, I have read *The Great Gatsby* and *A Separate Peace*. I am starting to see a real trend in the kind of books Bill gives me to read. And just like the tape of songs, it is amazing to hold each of them in the palm of my hand. They are all my favorites. All of them. (Chbosky 63)

Puberty of the Protagonists

Puberty is an indispensable phase in an individual's life, it is marked by physical and psychological changes that often coincide with broader cultural influences. The puberty of two protagonists (Timothy and Charlie) lies in the worlds they create through their imaginations and dreams. A father and son are traveling together on Timothy's journey. Then he discovers himself in the realms of English Literature, Music, and Painting in his dreams. Timothy's constant urge to make sense of his past and present and his apparent lack of care for the future actually serve to fuel that future. He moves from a harsh childhood into a stormy adulthood, from time to time his father sneaking into his life:

The fearfulness of a child is a strange thing. It needs not be attached to an immediate cause at all, for there was nothing in these narrow streets of London to frighten me and I suspect that I was possessed by some general dread of being abandoned. (Ackroyd 14)

The rest of the evening was very special. Since a lot of people were going away with their families to places like Florida and Indiana, we all exchanged presents with the people we weren't Secret Santas for. (Chbosky 67)

Charlie in uncommon style of thinking tries to navigate the worlds of adolescence and adulthood. He mentions Secret Santa as a ritual of a social gathering where people exchanged presents and gifts with individuals they were not assigned to give gifts to as part of a Secret Santa activity.

Something like that. 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. Maybe that is what makes people “participate.” I'm not really certain. Because I don't know if I would mind living for Sam for a while. Then

again, she wouldn't want me to, so maybe it's a lot friendlier than all that.
I hope so anyway. (Chbosky 122)

Here, Charlie is rationally reflecting individualism as a choice for those who don't prefer to share their own life with others. He contemplates his own choice whether to live for someone (Sam) or not, but he confesses that it might be not what really prefers.

On the other hand, Timothy has fascinating dreams, which could be considered a complementary section of the novel being set out in alternating chapters to motivate the reader to be well prepared for what is coming next. Though these dreams, he visits historical figures like Charles Dickens, William Byrd, and William Hogarth as well as well-known literary figures like Sherlock Holmes and Robinson Crusoe. Robinson Crusoe says to Timothy:

But think not where you are or where you may go, since with these books you are in England, everywhere and under any meridian. Darkness may bury your eyes but not your imagination.[....] Do you understand how you came by this Island? 'I came by way of England.(Ackroyd, 54)

As a "literary figure," Timothy is moulded by his early life's hidden, silent surroundings in addition to the restrictions of an orthodox tradition. Given that Timothy's voice is a pastiche of a cultural identity rather than being an impersonation of a specific person, it is just as cautious as any of Ackroyd's other pastiche voices, such as Wilde, Chatterton, and Dyer. He is not a famous historical figure or a reincarnation of one; rather, he is a character from the twentieth century (Gibson 2000, 144).

Wahlström (2014) asserted that "to survive the transition period from childhood to adulthood, something which Charlie does in a great part by learning from the novels that he reads". Charlie's experience is enhanced as much as he keeps reading books that his teacher gave him to read. *The Fountainhead* by Russian-American author Ayn Rand is one of the novels he read. He is really affected by philosophy of individualism reflected by the protagonist Roark, who refuses and fights against the traditional standards. Charlie expresses his pleasure and enjoyment while reading it:

Incidentally, I finished *The Fountainhead*. It was a really great experience. It's strange to describe reading a book as a really great experience, but that's kind of how it felt. It was a different book from the others because it wasn't about being a kid. And it wasn't like *The Stranger* or *Naked Lunch* even though I think it was philosophical in a way. But it wasn't like you had to really search for the philosophy. It was pretty straightforward, I thought, and the great part is that I took what the author wrote about and put it in terms of my own life. Maybe that's what being a filter means. I'm not sure.(Chbosky 178)

Karolides et al. argued that assuring the reader, Charlie says, "I mean nothing bad by this" (43). Instead, he intends to describe the experiences and feelings he has as a young person navigating a sometimes perplexing and occasionally terrible life:

I don't want to be somebody's crush. If somebody likes me, I want them to like the real me, not what they think I am. And I don't want them to carry it around inside. I want them to show me, so I can feel it, too. I want them to be able to do whatever they want around me. And if they do something I don't like, I'll tell them.(Chbosky 216)

Charlie found it difficult to concentrate when he wrote a letter because he was talking about a mysterious letter while he did so. This evidence leads to the conclusion that Charlie struggles to focus, which is a sign of the trauma he has undergone (Septiana and Thoyibi 2022, 8).

English Music is composed of nineteen chapters alternating between reality in contemporary England featuring retrospective autobiographical first-person narration and fantasy of literary historical works that Timothy, the narrator, experiences in his youth as visions, dreams or fancies. The son's quest for multiform heritage provides the central motivation of Harcombe's retrospection (Grubisic 2002). It's clear from the words to his father with which he starts his recollecting his journey:

Yes. I have returned to the past. I have made that journey. "you can't go back" you said when I told you my intention. "Those days are long gone." But, as I explained at the time, that is not necessarily true. One day is changed into another, yet nothing is lost. (Ackroyd 1)

Timothy's puberty becomes a lens through which he views English history, literature, and societal norms. He enjoys playing with a variety of fictional literary characters and outcasts from everyday life. Ackroyd may be simply spinning his present tale or offering a meek reflection on his forebears. With *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Dickens* being redirected into a new unsettling setting, the result is to relive some of the classics:

I remember you. You're in *The Pilgrim's Progress*[....] It's a story. I've read you in a story[.....] You may call it story, if you like[....] I never knew that stories could come true, but here I am in the middle of one! Do you think a book could be written about me?(Ackroyd 28)

In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie writes to a stranger, one before he starts his high school. At the end of the first letter, he wrote, "I should probably go to sleep now. It's very late. I don't know why I wrote a lot of this down for you to read. The reason I wrote this letter is because I start high school tomorrow and I am really afraid of going". (6)

Writing down his ideas allows Charlie to organize them and attempt to exert some control over them. These letters offer a close-up glimpse into his world, his ideas, his aspirations, his concerns, and his all-too-often precarious mental health. Young adult readers will be able to relate to the realistic first-person narrative and its internal monologues, which serve to express thoughts and emotions. All of these elements are

typical features of young-adult novels. As Meyer (2022) stated that, “Chbosky reaffirms through the intimacy of these letters, and this particular character trait of a socially awkward introvert, that one can rely on Charlie’s authority to tell his story.”

The Perks of Being a Wallflower employs an effective narrative style that has the ability to engross readers in the persona of the main character. We are able to think and feel as Charlie does when given insight into his reasoning behind the choices he makes and the frequently raw emotions that drive them, and by doing so, we can practice our empathy skills (Bull 2).

I walked around the school hallways and look at the people. I look at the teachers and wonder why they’re here. If they like their jobs. Or us. And I wonder how smart they were when they were fifteen. Not in a mean way. In a curious way. It’s like looking at all the students and wondering who’s had their heart broken that day, and how they are able to copy with having three quizzes and a book report due on top of that. Or wondering who did the heart breaking. And wondering why.(Chbosky 153)

As he discusses his day-to-day thoughts and feelings, Charlie's letters take on the intimate feel of personal journals. He describes the events in these letters as they are happening; this is a present-tense narrative in which he talks about what he did "today" and recollections that come to mind as he does (Mossin 2023, 68).

Conclusions

English Music is a novel interwoven between the past ‘heritage and culture’ and the present ‘identity quest’. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is about a lonely teenager, Charlie, who is swinging between reality and anonymity. In his letters to anonymous friend, he tells him everything he does, he did and even what he will do.

Both Timothy and Charley are depersonalized; the first is trying to move and live in past events with characters not present in actual life. The latter does not trust people around and writes letters to anonymous person starting with ‘Dear friend’ and finalizing his them with ‘Love always, Charlie’. Both of them try to tackle their present situation depending on abstract power. Chbosky portrays the experiences of puberty within the cultural context of American society, depicting the impacts on identity formation, and personal growth. On the other side, Ackroyd's narrative underscores the emotional and psychological dimensions of puberty within a cultural context. The protagonist's inner struggles and personal growth reflect broader societal changes and cultural transformations. Via introspective moments and interpersonal relations, Ackroyd captures the emotional landscape of adolescence, demonstrating how cultural influences shape individual experiences of puberty.

In both novels, the journey of self-discovery is shaped through the narrative structure, in which the protagonists’ identities are mixed with their societal and cultural inheritance. The gaps between them and their societies pushed them to, metaphorically

speaking, escape from real world to imaginative one. Timothy embarked an imaginative journey into stories of pioneers of English literature, music, singing and poetry. On the other hand, Charlie found a resort in his psychological journey of writing letters to an anonymous receiver, telling him his concerns and whatever he faces in his daily life. So, through those two internal journeys, the protagonists apparently recognized themselves within their society, made sense of the world around them and their infirmities are polished. Both of them are backed and stimulated by culture and tradition of the past to shape identity and overcome the troubles ahead.

Notes on Contributor

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