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The Perks of Being a Wallflower - Mini Analysis

Who among us has not felt as though they are on the outside, looking in, at some point in their lives? Who has not felt a sense of detachment from events that are running alongside our own lives, and even (for most of us), having that same sense of detachment, or possibly alienation from situations that we are currently involved in? While the idea of being on the periphery of a situation occurs with fair frequency in real life, Chbosky's protagonist Charlie attempts to portray himself as more of a "primary observer" than a true protagonist. We follow Charlie's first year of high school in an anonymous suburb of Pittsburgh. The author goes to many lengths to convince the reader that Charlie is the titular "wallflower", but in the end, the character development and writing style struggles to validate Charlie enough.

In a similar vein, the 2003 movie *The United States of Leland* follows a character who is similar in many thematic respects - a 16 year old Leland Fitzgerald who feels alienated from his family and friends, and has almost inexplicably murdered someone - his ex-girlfriend's mentally disabled brother. The primary character in both stories is represented as being highly detached. In *Wallflower*, we are pushed to this by many literary elements - the writing is in the form of a set of letters - so we are given a sense of separation from the main character from the very beginning. The letters are also written in a distant, detached way, so that even when Charlie is

represented as supposedly having incredibly deep and powerful emotions, there is difficulty in finding empathy or a sense of likeness with him, as is demonstrated by Chbosky's attempt to convince the reader at multiple points, eg: "When Patrick left me outside, I started to cry. It was real and panicky, and I couldn't stop it." (Chbosky, 250). In this sentence (as in others), Chbosky violates one of the primary writing techniques, of "Show, don't tell." As a point of fact, as the book wore on, I found Charlie's interaction to be less and less believable, as though he was becoming more estranged from the reader as time went on. Perhaps this is intentional by the author, but given the ending that the author has set up, and his desire to have Charlie be more of a participant, I find that to be unlikely. Being a visual medium, *The United States of Leland* represents this isolation in some more subtle and visual ways - faded sound during specific scenes and using washed-out or desaturated colors during others. All of these techniques attempt to do the same thing: bringing about a deep sense of alienation between the watcher/reader and the primary characters, and also reinforcing the detachment of the protagonists from the other characters.

The primary issue with *Wallflower* that stood out to me was the unending waves of clichéd characters and interactions that Chbosky attempted to use (albeit, mostly successfully), and the sheer density of banal imagery that he manages to pack in. In Charlie's freshman year, he manages to start smoking, start drinking, try marijuana and LSD, have his first (non-molestation) heterosexual and homosexual encounters, appear in *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, meet the secretly gay captain of the football team (and find out his secret), beat up several members of the football team and, to top it off - have a mental breakdown. While this works as a relatively successful story, it increases the lack of empathy with the main character, because as time goes

on, he becomes less believable. Similarly, I found the characters of *The United States of Leland* to fall along the same preconceived lines - eg: the athlete, the drug addict, the divorced and never-present parent. The only possible saving grace that I could consider was that the writers and directors feel that these types of people and characters are so omnipresent in our culture that they must be represented to make the story complete.

Once we strip away the clichés and the characters, however, somehow *Wallflower* managed to provoke a startling amount of emotion and empathy, although not sadness. I felt awkward and pained for Charlie in many places. The difficulty of being a teenager and trying to fit in is well portrayed, and his struggle with what he's supposed to feel and his mix of emotions stood out to me. In a like manner, Leland is able to portray his depression and incredible sadness at powerful points, and although it doesn't gain him enough redemption as a character, it makes the portrayal of the character somewhat more real instead of entirely one-dimensional.

The main characters in both stories are both meant to be portrayed as wallflowers - peripheral, shy people who tend to observe instead of participate, and this is generally shown. Both break sternly out of the mold at times, however - Charlie when he participates in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, or engages in a brawl, and Leland when he argues with Becky, and when he kills Ryan. The characters do, at a few points show that they don't fit the mold that has been crafted for them, but both primarily fill the roll of watcher. The one disparate note here is that Charlie actually participates in a great deal of specific activity that could possibly bely his status as a wallflower, but this is reconciled by his continued emotional detachment - even when he is participating, the letter-writing premise and writing style allow the audience to feel that implied distance.

The final theme or situation that comes to my thoughts when comparing these two pieces of media is that of the resolution and ending. Here is where these two stories manage to both show that the protagonists are incredibly similar, and yet have different outcomes - We find that both protagonists are not suffering from a simple sense of alienation or detachment, but instead are actually over empathetic, and are suffering from a case of emotional disassociation. While we are given the big reveal of Charlie's molestation as a causation for his mental illness, Leland's is not so clear cut - it appears to be related to an onset of deep depression due to many circumstances in his life.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower is full of language, characters, situations and social issues that make it an ideal candidate for analysis and teaching - but it seems almost too full. The breadth of its subject matter includes teen pregnancy, sex, drinking, drugs, mental illness, homosexuality and sexual abuse, and *The United States of Leland* has many of the same issues as well as divorce, relationship issues, infidelity, the struggles of dealing with a mentally disabled child, and death. There are no lack of memorable moments or controversial depictions in either, and anyone will likely find characters or situations that they can both relate to and learn from. The one thing that I felt was missing from both, despite the multitude of thought and learning that I gained - was a sense of enjoyment. I didn't feel a sense of redemption or joy after either of these stories, despite *Wallflower's* attempted uplift at the end, and as much as I would like to, I can't fault either storyteller for that, because life is often like that. Things end without a sense of closure or joy, and in spite of that, or perhaps because of it - I will probably find myself poring over both again.

WORKS CITED:

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