

**Exploring the Individual Mind:
The Functions of the Epistolary Form in *The Color Purple*
and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower***

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Abstract in Norwegian

Denne masteroppgaven tar for seg de to romanene *The Color Purple* (1982) av Alice Walker og *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) av Stephen Chbosky, som begge er skrevet i form av brev. Målet med oppgaven er å utforske hvilken rolle brevsjangeren spiller når det kommer til leserens oppfattelse av hovedpersonenes personlige utvikling og økende grad av selvrealisering. Brevsjangeren innebærer verk som er skrevet som en serie av dokumenter, oftest brev, der disse utgjør en handling, og er skrevet til en mottaker. Sjangeren har lenge blitt neglisjert, men det virker som at det nå har oppstått en fornyet interesse i den, noe som kan være et resultat av dens unike evne til å la leseren utforske individets psykologi. Jeg argumenterer for at oppfattelsen av hovedpersonenes økende selvrealisering og personlige utvikling er tett knyttet til brevsjangerens karakteristikk. Disse karakteristikkene definerer jeg i det første kapittelet, og de fungerer som grunnlaget for analysen videre. Der argumenterer jeg for at begge hovedpersonene, altså Charlie i *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* og Celie i *The Color Purple*, skriver brev som et forsøk på å håndtere sine lidelser. Begge karakterene er ofre for seksuelle overgrep, dog på svært ulike måter. Disse traumatiske opplevelsene er hovedgrunnen til karakterenes lidelser, og brevskrivningen deres hjelper dem med å finne en slags indre ro, og dermed utvikle seg psykisk. Jeg argumenterer for at dette ikke bare er synlig gjennom romanenes handlinger, men mer spesifikt gjennom hovedpersonenes diskurser i brevene deres. Dette kan for eksempel ses i form av at grammatikken og syntaksen deres utvikles, og gjennom deres økende evne til å artikulere sine tanker og følelser mer bevisst. Alt i alt argumenterer jeg for viktigheten av brevsjangeren når det kommer til disse oppfatningene, noe jeg også forsøker å demonstrere ved å diskutere hva som går tapt dersom brevaspektet forsvinner.

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Introduction

The epistolary novel is known to be one of the earliest forms of novels to be developed, and the form reached a peak in popularity in the eighteenth century with novels such as *Pamela* (1740) by Samuel Richardson and *Evelina* (1778) by Frances Burney.¹ Other well-known early epistolary novels are *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) by Johann Wolfgang Goethe. Since this period, the epistolary tradition's popularity has declined, and other genres have taken over the book market. According to Manzila N. Khabibova, the presence of the letter novel in the history of western literature is impossible to ignore, although its influence on the art of writing and to the novel's development has traditionally been neglected. However, she claims that after its fall in popularity, the form has gained renewed attention since the twentieth century, due to its ability to let the reader explore the minds of the characters.² Several modern epistolary works have been critically acclaimed, and novels in this form continue to be published despite its decline in popularity. Among those are *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) by Stephen Chbosky, which are the two works that this thesis will center on.

According to the *Oxford Reference*, the epistolary novel is a story written in the form of letters, or letters with journals, and often presented by an anonymous author masquerading as editor.³ Furthermore, the epistolary form technically includes any work written as a series of documents, or any work that integrates documents. These can be diary entries, newspaper clippings, legal files, and the like, but most commonly, epistolary novels consist of a series of letters.⁴ Additionally, these letters need to have an addressee. Irina Chesnokova claims that “the mode of address is one of the distinguishing features of epistolary genre”, and that the personal letter is typically considered to belong to a private discourse as a means of communication between a single sender and a single recipient.⁵ The form also has several

¹ Louise Curran, “Letters, letter writing and epistolary novels”, *British Library*, last modified April 20, 2023, <https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature/articles/letters-letter-writing-and-epistolary-novels>.

² Manzila Nuriddinova Khabibova, “The Historical Influence of the Epistolary Novel”, *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics* 2, no. 2 (2023): 76, <http://inter-publishing.com/index.php/IJLLAL/article/view/1161/1010>.

³ *Oxford Reference*, s.v. “epistolary novel”, last modified April 26, 2023, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095755138>.

⁴ Jessie van Eerden, “This Present Absence: : The Generative Power of Epistolary Form”, *Appalachian Review* 48, no. 3 (2020): 99, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/785639>.

⁵ Irina Chesnokova “The Addressee Types of the Internet Open Letters”, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 206 (2015): 15, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.10.005>.

other characteristics, and many scholars in the field have emphasized the novel's concern with representation of consciousness. Joe Bray divides definitions of "consciousness" into two main strands. The first one involves those who emphasize the totality of the thoughts which makes up a person's conscious being, while the other one involves those who view consciousness as a reflection of a cultural process where the individual mind is put up against the larger world. Bray further argues that novels written in a series of letters are well-suited to the exploration of "the subjectivity of a mind".⁶ According to Bray, more recent critics of the epistolary novel have also emphasized its ability to give a convincing representation of its characters' inner lives.⁷ Because the epistolary novel consists of letters that are supposed to be written by one or more narrators, in which they express their feelings to an addressee, this genre is well-suited for expressing the characters' innermost thoughts and emotions.

This thesis will discuss the two epistolary novels *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) by Stephen Chbosky in light of how the protagonists of both novels experience personal growth and increasing self-realization. More specifically, this thesis will argue that the perception that the protagonists of both *The Color Purple* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* experience personal growth and increased self-realization is closely connected to the characteristics of the epistolary form. I will argue that both protagonists, namely Charlie in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and Celie in *The Color Purple*, write letters as an attempt to deal with their suffering due to their traumatic experiences, and that writing these letters helps them with improving their self-reflexivity. Furthermore, I will argue that this is not only visible through the events that unfold in the two different novels, but more specifically through the protagonists' discourses in their letters. This can be seen in how their grammar and syntax change as they continue writing, as well as in how their descriptions of their thoughts and emotions gradually become more deliberate.

The Color Purple revolves around Celie, an African American girl who at the novel's start is only fourteen years old and have given birth to two children. This a result of being raped by her own father, who later turns out to be her stepfather. Celie is forced to marry Albert, a grown widower who is initially interested in marrying her sister Nettie. Nettie comes to stay with them, but the sisters are forcedly separated by Albert who insists that Nettie must leave. Many years go by, and Celie hears nothing from her sister until she one day is informed about a bunch of letters from Nettie that her husband, Albert, has hidden from her. Until this point, all the letters in the novel are written by Celie and addressed to God. When the hidden

⁶ Joe Bray, *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness* (Great Britain: Routledge, 2003), 6-7.

⁷ Bray, *The Epistolary Novel* (Great Britain: Routledge, 2003), 9.

letters are found, the novel becomes a series of letters between the two sisters instead. The story is set in rural Georgia, beginning sometime in the early 1900s when Celie is a teenager, and ending when she is a grown, independent woman.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower is about Charlie, a lonely teenager struggling to come to terms with his reality. He writes anonymous letters to a secret “friend”, because he needs someone to listen and understand without judging him. After the recent suicide of his best friend, Charlie is afraid of starting high school without any friends. Throughout his first year of high school, he writes letters where he tells the addressee about everything that is going on in his life and his feelings regarding these events. At the same time, Charlie is struggling with tackling the problems in his life, as he is feeling depressed and lonely most of the time. The major reason for his suffering is, we learn later, that he was molested by his aunt Helen when he was a child, something that he has repressed all memories of. Eventually, Charlie realizes why he has been struggling so badly, and the novel ends with him being committed to a mental hospital.

Those familiar with both these works will possibly find it surprising that I will compare them, as they are indeed very different. However, they still share some important similarities, apart from being epistolary. Celie and Charlie are around the same age when they start writing letters, something that they arguably do because they need a safe space where they can write about their feelings. Both characters are also, although in very different ways, victims of sexual abuse, something that arguably is their main motivation to write letters. Although the timespan of the two novels is significantly different, as the timespan of Chbosky’s novel is about a year and Walker’s novel goes on from Celie is a teenager until she is a grown woman, both characters experience a major character development, and a significant development in their self-realization. This is especially visible through their subjective discourses, or their personal letters, which let the reader explore how the way they write about these things changes.

This thesis consists of five chapters, and each chapter will hopefully contribute to show how the characteristics of the epistolary form are of significance for the perception of the narrators’ character development. In the first chapter, I discuss the epistolary form itself, and establish five significant characteristics which function as the base for the analysis of each novel. The second chapter is devoted to *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and the third chapter to *The Color Purple*. It is in these chapters that I perform detailed character analyses of Charlie and Celie, respectively. In these chapters, I draw connections to the characteristics of the epistolary form, in order to explore the significance of the form regarding the reader’s

perception of the characters' identity formation. The fourth chapter revolves around trauma theory, where I compare the two novels in terms of how the narrators' trauma is represented in the novels. There, I explore how the effects the epistolary form has on the perception of their increasing self-realization also connects with representations of trauma. In the fifth and final chapter, I discuss the film adaptations of both novels. Because many are probably more familiar with the movies than the novels, it is necessary to discuss these as well, although my focus is on comparing a selection of film reviews with the scholarship on the novels that I have already discussed in the chapters devoted to them. This will further emphasize the importance of the epistolary form, as it shows what gets lost as soon as the letter perspective "disappears" and is replaced with spoken dialogue. Overall, then, the main purpose of this thesis is to explore how the epistolary form plays an important role in how one interprets the characters and their development, which will hopefully call attention to a genre that has been neglected for a long time.

Chapter 1: The epistolary form

Chapter introduction

Defining a set of features for the epistolary form can be challenging, as existing epistolary works differ in terms of style and content. The word “epistolary” or the noun form of the word, “epistle”, originates from the Latin word “epistola” which means “a letter”. It should therefore come as no surprise that all epistolary works are written as a series of documents, most often letters, which carry the narrative element of the story. This characteristic is what makes a literary work epistolary, and the most obvious common feature of epistolary works. However, there are several other characteristics and themes that reoccur in such works, which will be discussed in this chapter. For the purpose of this thesis, it is relevant to discuss the most common features of the epistolary form, mainly in order to discuss how these features may affect the reading experience and thereby how the reader interprets the characters in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and *The Color Purple*. Also, it is of significance in order to discuss how these features enhance the perception that the characters experience personal growth and increasing self-realization. In the following pages I will focus on a selection of existing scholarship on the epistolary form and based on that establish what I will argue the most significant characteristics of the form are. Then I will go on to explore how *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and *The Color Purple* fit into these characteristics and discuss why they are epistolary novels.

1.1. Existing scholarship on the epistolary form and the characteristics of the epistolary novel

Most of the existing scholarship on the epistolary form was written a few decades ago, something that has made the task of finding new works about the genre itself challenging. Many scholars have argued that the popularity of the form peaked many centuries ago, and that there is a lack of new literary works that falls under this genre. This could be because the genre itself may be more difficult to concretize, something that could lead to few works being categorized as epistolary. According to Professor Joe Bray, the stylistic influence of the epistolary novel has often been neglected, even though many early novels were written in the form of letters. Bray further claims that for many scholars, the epistolary form has been viewed as “an early, experimental form which faded away once the third-person novel began

to realise its potential in the hands of novelists such as Austen and George Eliot.”⁸ He points out that one reason for this view may be that the epistolary novel often is thought to present a somewhat unsophisticated and transparent version of subjectivity, as the letter-writers just write down whatever comes to mind at the time of writing. In the book *The Epistolary Renaissance*, Maria Löschnigg and Rebekka Schuh similarly argue that there has been a tendency among critics of the epistolary form to dismiss the epistolary novel as only a primitive predecessor of the more complex third-person novel. They claim that the technique was used on the first form of the novel, which has made scholars view it as less developed and less sophisticated than other forms of novels.⁹ However, Bray believes that the epistolary novel is more than this and argues that this genre has played an important role when it comes to the novel’s development of representing individual psychology in a sophisticated manner, and that emotions shown in the fictional letter are not as unsophisticated and transparent as has been claimed.¹⁰

In her book published in 1963, Dorothy R. Thelander claims that by the 60s, so few epistolary novels were published that people tended to forget that the genre is more than another eighteenth-century phenomenon. Nevertheless, Thelander argues that the epistolary tradition has existed much longer than this, but that no classical epistolary novels survived to influence later fiction. According to her, an epistolary novel is a work consisting of real or fictional letters, arranged by the author in a series to carry the narrative element of a story.¹¹ She claims that texts written in a series of letters have existed for a long time, but that they cannot be considered epistolary novels unless the letters are organized to carry out an action. For example, several letters can be included in a work, as in the Bible, but the work is not an epistolary novel unless the letters form a storyline. Thelander further claims that the epistolary technique offers subtle possibilities to the skillful writer, although its stylistic requirements does not make it the easiest genre to write. She argues that the epistolary technique’s ability to present several views of an evolving situation is the form’s major strength, and that this can either come from a single person or from several individuals. If the author masters this technique, the reader will accept the letters as documents, which creates a special relationship between the reader and the epistolary novel.¹²

⁸ Bray, *The Epistolary Novel*, 1.

⁹ Maria Löschnigg & Rebekka Schuh, *The Epistolary Renaissance: A Critical Approach to Contemporary Letter Narratives in Anglophone Fiction* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 6.

¹⁰ Bray, *The Epistolary Novel*, 2.

¹¹ Dorothy R. Thelander, *Laclos and the Epistolary Novel* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1963), 11.

¹² Thelander, *Laclos and the Epistolary Novel*, 14-15.

About twenty years after Thelander, Janet G. Altman also claimed that there had been little critical or artistic interest in the epistolary form, and that it had been commonly assumed that the form was historically limited and peaked in eighteenth century Europe. However, she states that the form has received a renewed critical interest, but that most of the existing studies about the epistolary form mostly inform the reader about the existence of such works instead of suggesting models for reading them.¹³ Although epistolary works are different in terms of style and content, Altman argues that they still share a great number of similarities, and that these in turn are related to the characteristics of the letter itself. She argues that the basic characteristics of the letter influence the way meaning, both consciously and unconsciously, is constructed by both writers and reader of epistolary works.¹⁴

This thesis does not aim to solely discuss or define what the epistolary novel is, but rather to explore whether the characteristic of the genre is of significance when it comes to the readers perception that the main characters in *The Color Purple* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* experience personal growth and a development in their self-realization. It is not to say that any reader of the novels would *not* view the characters as more experienced and psychologically maturing had the novels been written differently. However, I will argue that it is precisely because the novels are written as series of letters that the reader may draw this conclusion, because reading the main characters' private letters make the reader respond to the text in a different way than when reading a novel where the plot is presented as a series of events through dialogue between the different characters. What I mean by this is that reading the letters creates the illusion that the narrator is speaking directly to us, something that makes the reading experience more intimate.

Apart from the letter perspective, several scholars have also emphasized how absence becomes a narrative force in epistolary works. Jessie van Eerden argues that we write letters to people because they are absent from us, because we long for them in one way or another. Hence, absence between two or more people becomes a narrative force in these types of novels, because it is what drives the characters to write.¹⁵ Similarly, Linda S. Kauffman argues that the letter writer writes to an addressee simply because the writer cannot speak to this person, because there is an absence between them.¹⁶ In other words, the absence between the letter writer and the addressee, and the letter writer's urge to communicate with this

¹³ Janet G. Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (USA: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 3-6.

¹⁴ Altman, *Epistolarity*, 4.

¹⁵ van Eerden, «This Present Absence», 99.

¹⁶ Linda S. Kauffman, *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), xix.

distant person, drives the plot of epistolary works. The presence of absence can thereby be said to be a typical feature of the epistolary form, and something that separates the form from other types of novels. In the article “Motifs in Epistolary Fiction: Analysis of a Narrative Sub-genre”, Ronald C. Rosbottom seeks to understand the relationship between epistolary fiction and other types of narrative fiction. He claims that even though the letter-novel was the dominating novel form of the eighteenth century, there is a scarcity of scholarship on the form’s properties.¹⁷ Rosbottom has chosen five dominant motifs which he thinks are essential when defining epistolary novels. These *are absence, time, exchange, reflexivity, and epistolarity*. These are all interesting characteristics, but for the purposes of my discussion I will focus on absence. Like the mentioned scholars, Rosbottom points out absence as one dominant motif, because epistolary communication simply cannot be justified unless the writer of letters is separated from the addressee. He further claims that absence comes in different forms, and that one must separate between geographical absence and psychological absence. Finally, he argues that one of the most consistent themes in epistolary works, and one of the factors that makes them especially touching for the reader, is not being able to satisfy one’s needs because of absence in either of these forms.¹⁸ Absence can thereby be said to not only be the driving force of the letter-writing, but also a feature that separates the epistolary form from other genres. Absence can indeed be a *theme* in other literary genres, like poems or autobiographies. However, in epistolary works, absence between two or more people *must* be present for the characters to write letters. In other words, compared to other genres, absence is crucial in epistolary works as it forces the plot, although absence can exist as a theme in other genres.

Something that further distinguishes the epistolary form from other forms of literature is that the letters in epistolary novels require an addressee. This might seem obvious, but it is of significance when distinguishing between epistolary novels and diary fiction, for instance. H. Porter Abbott argues that diary fiction includes single-writer epistolary fiction, but that letters require an addressee, and a diary note does not. While a diary is only meant for the eyes of the writer, letters are meant to be read by someone else. However, Abbott argues that fictive diarists often address their writings to someone, like the diary itself, and that what really distinguishes epistolary fiction from diary fiction is not the existence or non-existence

¹⁷ Ronald C. Rosbottom, “Motifs in Epistolary Fiction: Analysis of a Narrative Sub-Genre.” *L’Esprit Créateur* 17, no. 4 (1977): 279-280, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26280818>.

¹⁸ Rosbottom, “Motifs in Epistolary Fiction”, 283-284.

of an addressee but whether the addressee is given an active role in the work.¹⁹ When discussing the epistolary form, Ruth Perry argues that epistolary novels are fictions where characters write to one another, and that the characters use their letters to re-live moments they have shared.²⁰ Based on the arguments of Abbott and Perry, then, a work is epistolary if it consists of either letters addressed to an addressee that is given an active textual role, or letters written by several characters to each other.

Another thing that characterizes the epistolary form is that the writer of the letters achieves a certain degree of credibility or compassion from the reader. This is also connected to the characteristics of the letter itself because the letter often consists of personal thoughts that are not meant for everyone to see. Because the letters are meant for someone else, namely a fictional addressee, the reader of the epistolary novel may find it more exiting or intriguing to read these letters than to read something narrated in third person, for instance. Kauffman argues that the pathos that the protagonist expresses through the letters is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the epistolary novel.²¹ She uses Celie in *The Color Purple* as an example and argues that the discourse of pathos in her letters make her come across as honest and sincere, and that there is no distance or reservations between her and the reader. Regarding Celie, Kauffman further argues that:

Her inability to express these fears, her powerlessness, and the nonjudgmental, reportorial style in which we learn of her suffering all give the novel its particular pathos. Such pathos is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the traditional epistolary novel.”²²

I will discuss the details of this novel later, but the main message here is that this feature of the epistolary form contributes to give the reader the impression that the protagonist or letter writer is genuine and sincere.

An additional feature of the epistolary form is that the protagonist, or letter writer, often experiences suffering and isolation, which in turn is what carries the plot of the novel. As mentioned, Bray argues that the epistolary novel is well-suited for exploring the subjectivity of the individual, and that such novels often give the reader a sense of what it

¹⁹ H. Porter Abbott, *Diary Fiction: Writing as Fiction* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1984), 9-10.

²⁰ Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel* (New York: AMS Press, 1980), 122-123.

²¹ Kauffman, *Special Delivery*, 187-188.

²² Kauffman, *Special Delivery*, 188.

would be like to be someone else.²³ This seems reasonable, as the letters solely represent the thoughts of the character who has written them. Perry claims that most epistolary novels are about subjective realities that revolve around the characters' suffering and isolation, which they express through "outpourings of lavish consciousness".²⁴ Further, she claims that such fictions essentially end when the disturbing realities of these characters have improved, because these are the forces that motivates the plot of such novels. She argues that "In fact, isolation is so central to the epistolary paradigm that if the plot solves it, with a marriage for instance, before the novel is finished, it continues in an entirely new form."²⁵ In other words, one central element connected to the epistolary form is that the protagonist experiences something difficult without having the possibility to talk to anyone, which drives them to pen down their feelings and send the letters to someone who is distant from them. Because the suffering and isolation carries the plot of the epistolary novel, and the novel usually ends when these feelings are no longer present, there also seems to be a therapeutic dimension to the letter writing. Writing allows the protagonist to process unpleasant feelings and memories, and as the writing continues, the urge to write weakens. In this sense, writing the letters becomes a way for the protagonist to escape from the feeling of suffering and isolation, and when these feelings are no longer present, the story turns to an end.

The epistolary form's ability to let the reader explore the subjectivity of the individual is not something that only applies to epistolary novels, but the characteristics of the letter enhance this aspect. Autobiographies, namely books about a person's life written by that person, share this characteristic. The main distinction between autobiographies and epistolary novels in terms of exploring the subjectivity of the individual must be that epistolary novels are (often) fictional while autobiographies are not. However, autobiographies can be epistolary, and epistolary novels can be autobiographical. For example, the Finnish author Helmi Krohn (1871-1967) wrote the novel *Surun Lapsi* (Child of Sorrow), which she later revealed to be autobiographical. According to Maarit Leskelä-Kärki, Krohn wrote many letters to her friends revealing personal aspects about her works and she revealed that she preferred to write her fiction in the form of letters or diaries, because she had to write personally in order to succeed.²⁶ This is just an example of how epistolary works can be autobiographies, and vice versa, and I will not discuss the specifics of this author or her works

²³ Bray, *The Epistolary Novel*, 8.

²⁴ Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel*, 114.

²⁵ Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel*, 116.

²⁶ Maarit Leskelä-Kärki, "Narrating life stories in between the fictional and the autobiographical" *Qualitative Research* 8, no. 3 (2008): 328, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794106093628>.

any further. However, this illustrates how the epistolary form, compared to other genres, is well-suited to explore the subjectivity of the individual, because the letters let the author share deeply personal thoughts without having to reveal who these thoughts are coming from.

While discussing epistolary autobiographies it seems necessary to mention a newer addition to the epistolary form as well, namely the epistolary memoir. Memoirs and autobiographies can be difficult to distinguish, but the main difference between them is that an autobiography usually is an account of a person's entire life, while a memoir usually is about a specific period in a person's life or about a specific experience in that person's life. An example of an epistolary memoir is *Between the World and Me* (2015) by Ta-Nehisi Coates. The book is written as a letter to the author's son, where he shares his thoughts associated with being a black person living in America. Coates' biggest influence for this work is James Baldwin's work *The Fire Next Time* (1963), which partly is written as a letter to his nephew about issues regarding race in America. The reason why these are worth mentioning is that both works are often written about together, and both received much attention after their release. My belief is that it is the very personal and thereby engaging letters that capture the reader, which in turn is what has contributed to the works popularity. In these newer epistolary memoirs, then, which in turn are stories based on real people's lives and real events, the letterform gives the author a unique opportunity to discuss controversial themes and at the same time give their stories a personal touch, which again helps strengthen the authors' credibility. Also, it strengthens their impact on the reader, which is both these cases have to do with race in the US. This can in turn contribute to a change in people's attitudes regarding this topic.

Despite the long existence of epistolary works, it has been no easy task to define the form's main characteristics, especially due to the lack of scholarship on the form. However, based on the scholarship that does exist, there seems to be some features that reoccur, which I will summarize in order to make it easier to keep up with the following discussion. Based on the discussion so far, the dominant characteristics are as follows:

1. *The presence of absence*
2. *The existence of an addressee*
3. *The narrator's credibility or pathos*
4. *The narrator's suffering and isolation*
5. *The exploration of the individual's subjectivity.*

Undoubtedly, much more can be said about the epistolary form, and others would probably highlight other features as equally important. Also, most of these features are strongly connected to the features of the letter itself. However, I have chosen the mentioned characteristics as the most significant ones because they seem to reoccur in existing scholarship, and because they help distinguish the epistolary form from other forms of literature.

1.2. The epistolary form, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and *The Color Purple*

With the preceding discussion in mind, it is first and foremost necessary to discuss why both *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and *The Color Purple* can be classified as epistolary novels. Much has been said about Walker's novel, so the discussion of how this work is epistolary will therefore be relatively short. Not as much, however, has been said about Chbosky's novel, at least not regarding its form. Also, both novels, and not least the movie adaptations of them, have received much attention, but they have not frequently been studied comparatively.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower is narrated by Charlie, the novel's protagonist. He narrates the story through letters written to a "friend" and starts every letter by writing "Dear friend". However, we never get to know who this friend is. All the reader knows is that Charlie feels the need to write to this person because he needs someone to listen and understand, and that Charlie perceives this "someone" as a good person:

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. I need to know that these people exist. I think you of all people would understand that because I think you of all people are alive and appreciate what that means. At least I hope you do because other people look to you for strength and friendship and it's that simple. At least that's what I've heard.²⁷

The addressee of Charlie's letters remains unknown throughout the novel, and the novel consists of Charlie's letters only and no letters in return from the addressee. This seems natural as Charlie wants to be anonymous. Charlie also explains that he has not enclosed a return address on the letters due to this.²⁸

²⁷ Stephen Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (USA: Simon & Schuster, 2019), 3.

²⁸ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 3.

The fact that the novel consists of letters from one character only raises questions to whether the novel can be classified as epistolary at all. In her article “Form and Emotion in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*” Marie Dücker argues that one must consider the characteristics of the epistolary form and of the diary, as well as the narrative situation in the novel, to determine the genre of the novel.²⁹ As previously discussed, epistolary works can consist of letters written by a single character if the addressee is given a textual role, or they can consist of letters written by several characters to each other. In this case, Charlie is the only character who writes letters, which makes the communication one-sided. This raises the question of whether this novel should rather be classified as diary fiction. However, Dücker argues that even though the epistolary form usually consists of letters written by several physically dislocated characters as a means of communication, the form can also be used to express repressed emotions. In other words, there does not necessarily need to be a form of communication between several correspondents if the letters serve the purpose of helping the writer deal with suppressed emotions from the past.³⁰ This is definitely the case in Chbosky's novel, as Charlie writes to his so-called friend as an attempt to deal with the trauma in his life. By this definition, then, the novel could still be classified as epistolary.

It is also important to consider that unlike the writer of letters, the diarist does not feel the need for exchange. This means that the diarist lacks the need for sharing the writings, while the writer of letters naturally feels the need for sharing them with someone.³¹ Although Charlie wants to be anonymous, and his addressee is unable to respond to his letters, Charlie still wants someone to read his letters. The novel starts like this:

Dear friend, I am writing to you because she said you listen and understand and didn't try to sleep with that person at that party even though you could have. Please don't try to figure out who she is because then you might figure out who I am, and I really don't want you to do that.³²

²⁹ Marie Dücker, Dücker, Marie. “Form and Emotion in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*”. In *Writing Emotions: Theoretical Concepts and Selected Case Studies in Literature*, eds. Ingeborg Jandl, Susanne Knaller, Sabine Schönfellner and Gudrun Tockner (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2017), 160.

³⁰ Dücker, Form and Emotion in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 161-162.

³¹ Dücker, Form and Emotion in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 164.

³² Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 3.

This opening line indicates that Charlie feels a strong need to share his thoughts with this person, but that he needs to hide his name so that he avoids feeling ashamed of the things he is going to share. In this sense, the novel can be classified as an epistolary work, because although there is a lack of correspondence, there still exists an addressee that the letter writer wants to share his letters with. Arguably, he also needs this addressee to hold him responsible for his thoughts and actions. Also, in the 2019 anniversary edition of the novel that I possess, there is added an afterword with a new letter dated twenty years after the others. Here, Charlie reveals that the addressee has written back to him by spreading the letters around to random people and hoping that they would reach the right person, until they eventually reached him. Charlie also reveals that this addressee was a young woman who was going to commit suicide, but that she decided not to after reading his letters.³³ Thus, although we do not get to read any of these responses, the addressee is given a more active role in the story, which proves that there has been a form of exchange and that the communication has not been strictly one-sided after all. Although this afterword is exclusive for the anniversary edition, it still substantiates that for the author, the communication in the novel was not intended to be one-sided.

As previously discussed, one of the characteristics of the epistolary form is that the narrator of the story often experiences the feelings of suffering and isolation, which in turn is the reason for the letter-writing and what carries the plot. Thus, it seems necessary to determine whether Charlie is experiencing these feelings. For anyone who has read Chbosky's novel, it goes without saying that Charlie is experiencing mental pain. Charlie explains this quite well in the last letter written twenty years after the others: "Years ago, there was a very sad kid who needed a whole lot of help. And writing to you was the beginning of that help (...) I have never forgotten feeling sad or crazy or depressed or outside of my own self and own body."³⁴ The Cambridge Dictionary defines "isolation" as "the condition of being alone, especially when this makes you feel unhappy."³⁵ When Charlie's letter-writing starts, he has recently lost his best friend Michael, who committed suicide earlier that year. He ends the first letter by explaining that he wrote it because he is afraid of starting high school the next day. In the following letter, Charlie explains that only one person in school has given him any attention, and that everybody else ignores him or does not notice him. He also explains how

³³ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 236.

³⁴ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 235.

³⁵ Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. "Isolation", last modified October 21, 2022, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/isolation>.

he has been feeling lonely at home lately because his brother has moved away. He ends the letter by writing that he needs to focus on school to get an academic scholarship: “So, that’s what I’m doing until I meet a friend here.”³⁶ In other words, it seems clear by this letter alone that Charlie is feeling lonely, and that this makes him feel unhappy. Charlie clearly writes his letters due to experiencing suffering and isolation, which carries the plot of the story.

As mentioned, *The Color Purple* is a well-known epistolary novel which has been critically acclaimed since its release in 1982. Alice Walker even won several prizes for the novel, including the Pulitzer Prize for literature. The novel is frequently mentioned in academic discussions about epistolary works, but most of the critical debate about the novel has focused on its content. It is known as a feminist work about an abused Afro-American woman, and many have discussed its impacting themes. Not as much, however, has been said about what makes it epistolary. Although the novel is written as a series of letters, it is still necessary to discuss what it is that makes it an epistolary work. *The Color Purple* is first and foremost narrated by Celie, who starts writing her letters when she is fourteen years old. For most of the story she addresses her letters to God, but this changes after she discovers that her husband has been hiding letters addressed to her from her sister Nettie. After this, several changes occur in the narration of the story. First, Nettie’s letters are arranged in chronological order and presented in the novel, which makes Nettie a second narrator. Second, after Celie finds these letters, she soon starts addressing her letters to Nettie instead of God. She explains this in a letter to her sister: “Dear Nettie, I don’t write to God no more, I write to you. What happen to God? ast Shug. Who that? I say.”³⁷

Because Celie mostly addresses her letters to God, it could be argued that these are not letters but diary entries. However, like in Charlie’s case, Celie writes these letters as a way to deal with suppressed emotions from the past (and the present), which is in line with the characteristics of the epistolary form. As previously mentioned, Abbott argues that fictive diarists usually address their remarks to someone, like a friend, lover, God, or the diary itself. He further claims that even though the diarist only writes for himself, the entries often contain an addressee, although they are not really meant to be seen by anyone.³⁸ What is meant by this is that diary entries often start with phrases like “dear god”, “dear friend”, “dear diary”, and the like, although this addressee does not really exist. This could arguably be the case in *The Color Purple*, as Celie addresses her letters to God, an addressee that one naturally cannot

³⁶ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 10.

³⁷ Walker, *The Color Purple* (USA: Orion Books, 2017), 173.

³⁸ Abbott, *Diary Fiction*, 10.

really send the letters to. However, there is a reason behind Celie's choice of addressee. Celie's father, who abuses her sexually, threatens her by saying that she cannot tell anyone but God about what has happened. The novel starts with a quote from this, saying that: "*You better not never tell nobody but God. it'd kill your mammy.*"³⁹ Also, in a letter to Celie, Nettie adds a further explanation to why Celie addresses her letters to God:

I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was. Well, now I know what you meant. And whether God will read letters or no, I know you will go on writing them; which is guidance enough for me.⁴⁰

The reason why Celie addresses her letters to God seems to be that she feels too much shame to write to an existing person, in addition to having been threatened not to tell anyone. As the plot develops, the story is narrated by both Celie and Nettie, where they communicate through letters to each other. This cancels out the problem of the lack of an actual addressee regarding whether the work is epistolary.

Similar to Charlie, Celie experiences suffering and isolation, which carries the plot of the story. In terms of suffering, Celie certainly experiences mental pain, not only due to the sexual abuse she experiences but also because she is oppressed and treated badly by everyone surrounding her. She is forced by her father to marry her husband, Albert, whom she refers to as "Mr----". Albert originally wanted to marry Celie's sister Nettie, whom he finds much prettier, but ends up with marrying Celie instead because Nettie is too young. Albert is a widower and has several children with his deceased wife, whom he needs Celie to take care of. She lives in a loveless marriage and is treated as nothing more than a housekeeper who no one really cares about. Celie explains this quite well during a conversation with her stepson Harpo: "Mr---- marry me to take care of his children. I marry him cause my daddy made me. I don't love Mr----- and he don't love me."⁴¹

In addition to all this, Celie is isolated from her loved ones. Not only is she separated from her sister, whom her husband denies her to communicate with, but she is also separated from her children, and her mother died when she was young. As a consequence of the sexual abuse, Celie has birthed two children, a girl and a boy. Her stepfather immediately gave the

³⁹ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 3.

⁴⁰ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 117.

⁴¹ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 61.

children away without consulting Celie. The death of her mother and the physical separation from her sister and her children affects Celie strongly, and there is a great sadness in her life. In a conversation with Shug Avery, Albert's lover, who Celie ironically enough becomes very close with, Celie starts crying and explains why she is sad:

My mama die, I tell Shug. My sister Nettie run away. Mr----- come git me to take care his rotten children. He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me, I say.⁴²

All these events drive Celie to write letters and thereby carry the plot of the story, which is typical for epistolary novels.

By now, there should be no question that both the main works are epistolary. This is evident through the presence of several, arguably all, of the dominating epistolary characteristics which I defined earlier. The following chapter will be about *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. There, I will discuss how Charlie experiences personal growth and increased self-realization, and how this is visible through the development of his discourse in his letters. I will also analyze Charlie based on the mentioned characteristics of the epistolary form, to explore how these affect the reader's impression of his development. Of course, it is important to state that these letters are not actually written by Charlie, as he is a fictional character, but by the author. The analysis of these letters will therefore be focusing on the aesthetics of the letters, assuming that they are written by Charlie.

⁴² Walker, *The Color Purple*, 103.

Chapter 2: *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

2.1. Existing scholarship on *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

Although *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is a well-known work, it must be said that it has been easier to find scholarship on its popular movie adaptation rather than on the novel itself. I will return to the film in a later chapter and elaborate more on it there. Returning to the novel then, the scholarship that does exist gives the impression that most readers view the work as a typical coming-of-age novel. In *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, “coming-of-age novel” is described as an approximate equivalent to the German *Bildungsroman*, with the only difference being the timespan. While a *Bildungsroman* most often follows the development of the protagonist from early childhood to early adulthood, a coming-of-age novel is often devoted to different crises related to puberty and adolescence more specifically.⁴³ In the article “Contemporary Narratives of *Bildung*”, MéliSSa Gélinas seeks to distinguish the different terms related to the traditional *Bildungsroman*, one of them being coming-of-age stories.⁴⁴ She argues that “(...) the tacit temporal linearity and anthropocentric thrust of the “coming of age” process might not reflect the diversity of present-day narratives of *Bildung*.”⁴⁵ Despite the somewhat different descriptions, there seems to be an agreement that what distinguishes coming-of-age stories from the traditional *Bildungsroman* is the timeframe of the story. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* fits within the coming-of-age genre, as it follows Charlie only through his freshman year of high school. During this year, he is struggling with typical problems related to adolescence, like coping with new romances and finding new friends. However, he is also dealing with more serious problems, like the suicide of his best friend, the death of his aunt Helen, and his own mental issues. In other words, a lot is happening in Charlie’s life during this year, and many of these events seem to be decisive when it comes to his development as a person.

In addition to referring to Chbosky’s novel as a coming-of-age novel, many critics highlight its representation of mental health related issues. For example, Alison S. Monaghan argues that it is a complex novel that deals with so many heavy issues that there is not enough

⁴³ Chris Baldick, “coming-of-age novel”, in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 2008, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199208272.001.0001/acref-9780199208272-e-232>.

⁴⁴ MéliSSa Gélinas, “Contemporary Narratives of *Bildung*: New Directions.” *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 2 73, no. 3 (2019), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00397709.2019.1633801>.

⁴⁵ Gélinas, “Contemporary Narratives of *Bildung*”, 138.

space to address all of them.⁴⁶ However, she mentions that the novel is often referred to as a cult classic that is particularly popular amongst millennials, but that she believes the novel to be much more than that:

(...) this is not just a collection of letters or an account of one teenager's angsty, depressed teen years. Instead, the world that Charlie describes in his letters to his friend during this pivotal year in his life reflects the many confusions and hardships that a typical teenager might face during his or her fresh-man year in high school.⁴⁷

She further argues that the struggles that Charlie faces during this year are not that unusual for someone that age, which makes the novel relatable for many, not just for millennials. Moreover, Monaghan argues that Chbosky's portrayal of Charlie's experiences is exceptionally effective, especially when it comes to topics regarding mental health. She claims that one of the reasons that the novel has this effect on the reader is that Charlie's confessions make it easy for the reader to connect with him and relate to his experiences.⁴⁸ Thus, Charlie's ability to seem honest and relatable through his letters has a special effect on the reader, which in turn can be related to several of the characteristics of the epistolary form, which will be discussed in more detail at a later point.

In the article "The Epistolarity in Young Adult Literature", Emily Wasserman argues that "as a form, the personal thinking and private worlds of letter writing are well-suited to the reflection and construction of identity which takes place in young adult literature."⁴⁹ She discusses how Charlie, due to his conflicting issues and emotions, writes letters to reflect on his, and others' lives, and uses them as a tool to come to terms with his past. For Charlie, then, the letters work as a space to be honest and speak his mind, which according to Wasserman is a space necessary for human development.⁵⁰ She further argues how Charlie, as he writes letters, gains a new perspective on his life, and how he in the final letter in many ways comes to terms with himself.⁵¹ In other words, Wasserman describes a significant development in his mental state, which is especially visible through his letter writing.

⁴⁶ Alison S. Monaghan, "Evaluating Representations of Mental Health in Young Adult Fiction: The Case of Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*." *ENTHYMEMA*, no. 16 (2016): 39, <https://doi.org/10.13130/2037-2426/7400>.

⁴⁷ Monaghan, "Evaluating Representations of Mental Health in Young Adult Fiction", 39.

⁴⁸ Monaghan, "Evaluating Representations of Mental Health in Young Adult Fiction", 39-41.

⁴⁹ Emily Wasserman, "The Epistolary in Young Adult Literature" *ALAN Review* 30, no. 3 (2003): 48. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/epistolary-young-adult-literature/docview/212258379/se-2>.

⁵⁰ Wasserman, «The Epistolarity in Young Adult Literature», 50.

⁵¹ Wasserman, «The Epistolarity in Young Adult Literature», 51.

Similarly, Marie Dücker argues that Charlie experiences an emotional dilemma typical for adolescents, which in turn is typical for coming-of-age novels. She describes him as a person feeling “despair, sadness, self-doubt, occasional glimpses of hope and a deep longing for love”, who starts writing letters to help him cope with starting high school without having any friends.⁵² Like Wasserman, Dücker claims that Charlie’s growing sense of self-reflexivity is visible in his letters, and that he by his final letter has succeeded in many aspects of life that seemed impossible to him in the beginning. More specifically, she discusses how Charlie as a result of his writing starts to remember that he was sexually molested by his Aunt Helen in the past, whom he until that point has described as his favorite person. Therefore, the epistolary form, according to Dücker, works as a fundamental tool in the development of Charlie’s identity.⁵³

Consequently, there seems to be a certain level of agreement between most scholars regarding their perceptions of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and its protagonist Charlie, which is that it is a coming-of-age novel that addresses important themes and issues related to adolescence and mental health. The typical perception of Charlie seems to be that he is a depressed and lonely teenager struggling to fit in with his peers in high school, and who writes letters as an attempt to deal with everything that is going on in his life. There is also an agreement between the mentioned scholars that he experiences personal growth and an increased level of self-reflexivity, which in many ways is visible through the development of his letters. In other words, they agree that the epistolary form has a significant effect on how the reader perceives Charlie and his development as a character. In this chapter, however, I will argue that the epistolary form not only influences the reader’s perception of the protagonist, but that the letter writing itself is what contributes to increasing the protagonist’s self-realization. What I mean by this is that by writing down his thoughts and thereby putting his emotions into words, he realizes things about himself that allow him to develop as a person. The genre itself therefore allows the protagonist to experience increased self-realization.

The already existing debate on *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* furthermore consists of more general remarks on its themes and issues related to mental health and the coming-of-age genre. What is lacking, however, is more detailed insights on these themes and issues. Therefore, my discussion will provide a closer reading of the novel regarding these topics compared to what already exists. Also, my discussion will hopefully add new insights to the

⁵² Dücker, Form and Emotion in Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 159.

⁵³ Dücker, Form and Emotion in Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 159-160.

existing debate because it focuses on how the epistolary genre, and the characteristics that pertain to it, are of significance when it comes to the narrator's development, and the reader's perception of this development.

2.2. Character analysis of Charlie in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

In this chapter, I will analyze Charlie according to the four main parts of the novel. For each of these parts, Charlie seems to experience some form of personal development. Every part also ends with him experiencing something that makes him have some sort of an epiphany, whereas the next part then begins with him processing this experience through writing a new letter. As discussed, the work is viewed as a coming-of-age novel, and Charlie's character development in each part of the novel is therefore in accordance with the genre. Dividing the analysis into these four parts also contributes to clarify, or illustrate, how the main character's self-realization increases letter by letter, which again is connected to the characteristics of the epistolary form. I will focus on some central motifs and themes in the novel and analyze how these change in Charlie's discourse. Such changes can be seen in how he writes about the other characters, but also how he writes about more abstract topics such as friendship and art. In the previous chapter, I established five characteristics of the epistolary form as the most significant for the purpose of this thesis, and I will apply these wherever relevant. To avoid any confusion, I will list these again:

1. *The presence of absence*
2. *The existence of an addressee*
3. *The narrator's credibility or pathos*
4. *The narrator's suffering and isolation*
5. *The exploration of the individual's subjectivity*

The novel's first part consists of letters written between August 25 and October 28, which is a relatively short time span considering how much Charlie develops during this period. As mentioned, he starts the first letter by explaining why he feels the need to write, which is partly because he is afraid of starting high school the next day and partly because he is feeling sad. However, there are other factors that contribute to his anxiousness, which he is not necessarily aware of himself. Charlie is experiencing the feelings of both suffering and isolation, mainly due to a repressed childhood trauma connected to being molested by his aunt

Helen.⁵⁴ In addition, Charlie is struggling with the loss of his best friend Michael. Certain names and events are repeated throughout the letters which arguably symbolize Charlie's identity formation. It seems like he becomes more aware of *why* he mentions these things as he continues writing, and that this awareness develops in line with his identity formation. In other words, as he gradually develops personally, he simultaneously becomes more aware of the reasons behind his suffering. This development is also more visible for each part of the novel, and one can argue that Charlie in the first part of the novel is a quite different person than Charlie in the last part of the novel. Interestingly, one can also argue that this does not only apply to his development from start to end of the novel, but also for his development from start to end in each separate part. In the following, I will discuss this development by analyzing the change in Charlie's discourse about certain themes. Of course, I will not include every letter or every theme, but rather a selection of themes that are of significance regarding his identity formation, especially in relation to the characteristics of the epistolary form.

2.2.1. Part 1: August 25, 1991 – October 28, 1991

Charlie's mentions of Michael, his best friend who committed suicide, become more deliberate throughout the novel. Charlie mentions the suicide already in the first letter and explains what happened when he found out about it and how he handled it. He explains how Michael was a nice person and how he struggles to understand why he did it: "As much as I feel sad, I think that not knowing is what really bothers me."⁵⁵ Then, he writes that he reread that sentence and that it does not sound like how he talks, especially since he mostly responded to the suicide by crying and screaming a lot.⁵⁶ This indicates that he is struggling to put his feelings into words, at least his feelings regarding the loss of Michael, and that writing about it makes him more aware of it. The letter writing thereby allows him to reread and process his feelings in a way that would not have been possible if the novel was written in another form. The awareness of this develops throughout the novel. In the first part, it seems like he is in somewhat denial of what has happened. He writes that: "Michael never left a note or at least his parents didn't let anyone see it. Maybe it was "problems at home". I wish I knew. It might make me miss him more clearly. It might have made sad sense."⁵⁷ For the rest

⁵⁴ Because this is such an important theme of the novel, I will go into more detail about this in another chapter, where I will compare the two novels in terms of their representations of trauma.

⁵⁵ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 5.

⁵⁶ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 5.

⁵⁷ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 6.

of part one, Charlie does not write anything particular about Michael. He only mentions him a couple of times in rather casual contexts. This also indicates that he has not fully processed Michael's death, and that he needs more time to be able to properly write about it or him. Regarding the listed characteristics of the epistolary form, it seems clear that Charlie is experiencing the feelings of both suffering and isolation. This suffering and isolation is also what drives him to write the letters, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, is typical for the epistolary form.

Another character in the novel who affects Charlie's personal growth is Bill, Charlie's advanced English teacher. Bill continues to give Charlie books to read and write essays about, because he believes that he has "a great skill at reading and understanding language"⁵⁸. In one of the letters in part one, Charlie explains how Bill gave him a C on his essay, partly because he needs to use more difficult words. Charlie thinks that using words that does not come natural to him seems pointless, and that people who does this are insincere.⁵⁹ One way to interpret this is that he prefers that people speak frankly about things, which again helps strengthen his credibility as a protagonist. Another way to interpret this is that by being given feedback on his writing by Bill, he becomes more aware of how he writes, which affects how he continues to write about things. Also, this arguably makes him process his thoughts and feelings more, because he must consider his wording in his essays, which in turn transfers to his letter-writing. In another letter dated a few weeks later, Charlie writes about how Bill has encouraged him to participate more in life, because Charlie thinks a lot and mostly observes others without participating in conversations or activities himself.⁶⁰ Interestingly, a couple of weeks later, he starts a new letter by apologizing for not having written anything, and explains why:

I'm sorry I haven't written to you in a couple of weeks, but I have been trying to "participate" like Bill said. It's strange because sometimes, I read a book, and I think I am the people in the book. Also, when I write letters, I spend the next days thinking about what I figured out in my letters. I do not know if this is good or bad.

Nevertheless, I am trying to participate.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 11.

⁵⁹ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 16.

⁶⁰ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 26.

⁶¹ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 30-31.

This does not only indicate that Charlie has taken Bill's advice seriously, but it also indicates that by doing so, he has started to become more aware of how he feels, instead of getting lost in his own thoughts. Thus, Bill has a great impact on Charlie's development already in the novel's first part, and he continues to influence him in the following parts as well. This also emphasizes the therapeutic dimension of the epistolary form connected to the narrator's suffering and isolation, as writing the letters makes him process the things he has written about, which in turn increases his self-realization. The characteristic connected to the exploration of the individual's subjectivity is also present here, as Charlie can let the reader into his most private thoughts, which he probably would not have been able to if he was not anonymous.

Charlie meets Sam and Patrick for the first time during the first part of the novel. Their friendship occupies much of his thoughts and they have a great impact on his identity formation. Charlie develops a romantic interest for Sam, which has a significant impact on making him remember his repressed childhood trauma. However, this will be discussed in more detail later, and for the purpose of this discussion, I will focus on the impact the friendship with Sam and Patrick has on Charlie's self-development. Sam and Patrick are a few years older than Charlie. They are also outgoing people with a lot more experience than him. Despite this, they welcome Charlie into their friend group, which is a new experience for him. Sam and Patrick can in many ways be viewed as role models for him, as they introduce him to new things as well as making him feel seen. In the first part of the novel, just a few weeks after Charlie has met Patrick and Sam for the first time, he writes that he meets them at a football game, and that even though he had seen them that same day, he acts like he has not seen them in a year, because he finds it funny. Although this behavior is somewhat strange, Sam and Patrick accept it: "The great thing about Sam is that she doesn't think I'm crazy for pretending to do things. Patrick doesn't either (...)." ⁶² This indicates that they make him feel less nervous, which makes it easier for him to participate more. Later that day, they bring him to a party, and he becomes overwhelmed because the people there are actually interested in him:

Patrick then said something I don't think I'll ever forget. "He's a wallflower." And Bob really nodded his head. And the whole room nodded their head. And I started to feel nervous in the Bob way, but Patrick didn't let me get too nervous. He sat down

⁶² Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 32.

next to me. “You see things. You keep quiet about them. And you understand.” I didn’t know that other people thought things about me. I didn’t know that they looked. I was sitting on the floor of a basement of my first real party between Sam and Patrick, and I remembered that Sam introduced me as her friend to Bob. And I remembered that Patrick had done the same for Brad. And I started to cry. And nobody in that room looked at me weird for doing it.⁶³

This passage shows that for the first time ever, Charlie feels like part of a group, and he understands that people appreciate him and accept him for who he is. Although this happens just a few weeks after he meets Sam and Patrick for the first time, their inclusiveness and openness towards him has already affected his self-awareness, and they continue to impact his personal growth throughout the novel. This passage also illustrates how the epistolary form allows the reader to explore the subjectivity of the letter writer’s mind, as it allows the narrator to share his deepest thoughts and feelings. The characteristic “the narrator’s credibility and pathos”, which involves that the narrator comes across as particularly honest and sincere, is also very present in this passage. By exposing himself like this, Charlie comes across as a credible narrator, which is one of the epistolary form’s major strengths.

Charlie’s discourse regarding his family members also changes quite significantly throughout the novel, in line with his personal development. It is evident that his emotionally distant family members contribute to his loneliness, something that further emphasizes the narrator’s suffering and isolation. Because Charlie was told that Michael had problems at home, he starts to wonder whether he has this too: “One thing I do know is that it makes me wonder if I have “problems at home” but it seems to me that a lot of other people have it a lot worse.”⁶⁴ This indicates that he is in denial about the things that are going on in his own home, or at least about how this affects him. It appears like most of his family members have enough with their own lives and their own problems, which in many ways leads them to ignore Charlie and his needs:

It has been very lonely because my sister is busy being the oldest one in our family. My brother is busy being a football player at Penn State. (...) My dad really hopes he will make it to the pros and play for the Steelers. My mom is just glad he gets to go to college for free because my sister doesn’t play football, and there wouldn’t be enough

⁶³ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 40-41.

⁶⁴ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 6.

money to send both of them. That's why she wants me to keep working so hard, so I'll get an academic scholarship.⁶⁵

This suggests that their father is busy worrying about Charlie's brother's football career, while his mother is busy worrying about his sister, and thereby overlook Charlie and his problems. This emotional distance at home contributes to his suffering, and although he tells himself that other people have it worse, he becomes more aware of how his emotionally absent parents affect him later in the novel. However, already in the first part, it is evident that this absence is part of the reason for why Charlie writes the letters. As discussed in the previous chapter, one of the characteristics that distinguishes the epistolary form from other genres is "the presence of absence". Although this usually concerns a physical absence, namely the absence of the addressee, I will argue that it can also include an abstract absence. In this case, Charlie's family members are emotionally unavailable, which drives him to seek support other places, mainly through the recipient of the letters.

At the homecoming dance in October, Charlie lets the air out of Dave's tires, an incident that clearly illustrates how he goes from observing passively to participating more. Dave is a friend of Charlie's brother, who attended a party at their house a few years earlier. At this party, Dave tried to rape a girl in Charlie's room, while Charlie was sitting there quietly without intervening. In the same letter where Charlie writes that he has been trying to participate more, he also writes about this event. He explains how he and Sam have been talking about this incident, and how he does not really understand what happened until then: "I thought about it quiet for a long time, then I looked over to Sam. "He raped her, didn't he?" She just nodded. I couldn't tell if she was sad or just knew more things than me."⁶⁶ The next day, Charlie sees Dave dancing with a girl at the homecoming dance, and he gets so mad that he feels like hurting Dave. However, he manages to calm down, but still decides to let the air out of Dave's car's tires. Although he does not speak up to Dave, this still represents a development within him. Not only does he finally understand what was really happening in his room that night, but he also feels the need to do something about it. Thus, this represents how he slowly moves towards being a participant, instead of just being a passive observer, or a "wallflower". The features of the epistolary form also contribute to strengthen the perception of this development, especially the feature regarding the exploration of the narrator's subjectivity. Because everything is told from Charlie's point of view, it becomes

⁶⁵ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 9-10.

⁶⁶ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 35.

very clear how his thoughts and feelings about this change. For instance, he cannot tell what Sam really thinks, but he is very clear about his own feelings towards the matter. One could argue that this subjectivity makes him an unreliable narrator, and that this is something that is true for all epistolary works. However, the letters allow the reader to explore his innermost thoughts and feelings, which in turn strengthens the perception that he as a character goes through a major development.

2.2.2. Part 2: November 7, 1991 – January 1, 1992

In several of the letters of the second part of the novel, Charlie writes about a poem that he received from Michael before he died. This poem is about someone committing suicide, something that everyone seems to understand except from Charlie. However, as he becomes more depressed, he simultaneously becomes aware of the true meaning of the poem. The last part of the poem indicates that someone cuts their own wrists, which is why it seems clear that it is about someone ending their life. Because it is a relatively long poem, I will include only the last part of it, which goes like this:

That's why on the back of a brown paper bag
He tried another poem
And he called it "Absolutely Nothing"
Because that's what it was really all about
And he gave himself an A
and a slash on each damned wrist
And he hung it on the bathroom door
because this time he didn't think
he could reach the kitchen.⁶⁷

Charlie gives this poem to Patrick for Christmas and reads it out loud for the whole friend group. After he has read it, everyone else is quiet and sad, but Charlie does not seem to understand the poem like the others do:

When I was done reading the poem, everyone was quiet. A very sad quiet. But the amazing thing was that it wasn't a bad sad at all. It was just something that made

⁶⁷ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 77.

everyone look around at each other and know that they were there. Sam and Patrick looked at me. And I looked at them. And I think they knew. Not anything specific really. They just knew.⁶⁸

It is unclear what Charlie thinks that Patrick and Sam know here, but one way to interpret this is that Charlie's interest in that poem makes them understand that he is struggling, although he does not understand it himself.

During the second part of the novel, Charlie seems to mention Michael whenever something bad has happened or when he is feeling more depressed. For example, during the Christmas break, just after Charlie has read the poem, as well as having had his first kiss with Sam, he writes that he is afraid of going to this bad place that he has gone to before. In the next letter, he is worried about what is happening to him, and explains this to the addressee: "I hope it's okay that I'm telling you this. I just don't know what else to do. I always get sad when this happens, and I wish Michael were here."⁶⁹ Not long after this, on New Year's Eve, Charlie tries LSD, which makes him very philosophical, as well as feeling like his world is spinning. This makes him write a new letter, where he mentions the poem that he received from Michael again because he has finally understood the meaning of it:

I just remembered what made me think of all this. I'm going to write it down because maybe if I do I won't have to think about it. And I won't get upset. But the thing is that I can hear Sam and Craig having sex, and for the first time in my life, I understand the end of that poem. And I never wanted to. You have to believe me.⁷⁰

As the end of that poem is about someone committing suicide, one can interpret this letter as Charlie's way of saying that he is feeling suicidal, although he does not want to feel that way. His gradual understanding of the poem therefore symbolizes his increasing self-awareness, even if this is not always a positive experience. Furthermore, the epistolary form and his anonymity allows him to be as honest as possible. This honesty, and thereby this credibility that he achieves as a narrator, is of significance regarding the reader's perception of his increasing self-realization.

⁶⁸ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 70-71.

⁶⁹ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 80.

⁷⁰ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 102.

As discussed in the first part, Bill inspires Charlie to participate more, and something that symbolizes his increasing participation is his involvement in a fanzine called *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The members arrange local *Rocky Horror Picture Show* showings, and Charlie writes that going to these is the thing he has liked best about the year: “It’s really fun because all these kids dress up like the people in the movie, and they act out the movie in front of the screen.”⁷¹ On some occasions, Charlie also takes part in these performances. Because he appears to be shy, and usually watches others passively instead of taking part in activities, it may seem strange that he finds these performances so exiting. One way to interpret his excitement for this is that dressing up as someone else allows him to step out of his comfort zone, because he does not have to be himself or say what he really means. This is also comparable to the passage discussed in relation to part one, where he meets Sam and Patrick and pretends that he is someone else and explains that this is something that he likes to do for fun. Although Charlie pretends to be someone else in these settings, his increasing participation still appears as a major development for him. Sam and Patrick are also part of this Rocky Horror group, and his new friend Mary Elizabeth is in charge of it. Charlie’s participation also leads to him starting dating Mary Elizabeth, which will be discussed in more detail in relation to part three. However, regarding the second part of the novel, one could argue that the inclusivity that his new friends in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* express towards Charlie allows him to let loose without feeling judged. Again, this relates to the epistolary form’s characteristic “the presence of absence”, especially if absence is viewed as something abstract that is missing in one’s life, such as friendships or happiness. As discussed in the first chapter, Ronald C. Rosbottom claims that absence comes in different forms, also a psychological one, and that the narrator seeks to satisfy one’s needs because of absence in either of these forms.⁷² Charlie’s involvement in the fanzine can be viewed as filling a void in his life, because this is the first time in his life that he is part of a group where he feels seen.

2.2.3. Part 3: January 4, 1992 – April 26, 1992

During the third part of the novel, Charlie is going through all sorts of emotions, and he is struggling a lot more mentally than he did in the previous parts. At least, he seems to be more aware of his struggling, which could be a consequence of his letter writing. This part of the

⁷¹ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 50.

⁷² Rosbottom, «Motifs in Epistolary Fiction», 283-284.

novel clearly enhances the importance on the epistolary form. The first letter here is written just after the new year starts, where Charlie apologizes to the addressee for the letter he wrote on New Year's Eve. As mentioned, he had taken LSD on New Year's Eve, which affected him quite strongly. He explains how he does not really remember what he wrote in that letter, but that he remembers how important it felt to post the letter that night: "It's weird how important it seemed at the time. Once I got to the post office, I dropped the letter into the mailbox. And it felt final. And calm."⁷³ Interestingly, just after the letter is posted, he starts throwing up heavily and his thoughts starts spinning:

And my mind played hopscotch. My brother ... football ... Brad ... Dave and his girlfriend in my room ... the coats ... the cold ... the winter ... "Autumn Leaves" ... don't tell anyone ... you pervert ... Sam and Craig ... Sam ... Christmas ... typewriter ... gift ... Aunt Helen ... and the trees kept moving ... they just wouldn't stop moving ... so I laid down and made a snow angel.⁷⁴

This passage shows that by writing letters, he subconsciously becomes more aware of the things that are really bothering him, not just the more obvious things like family problems or Michael's suicide. He also writes that it is weird how important it felt to post the letter, which emphasizes the therapeutic effect the letter writing has when he is depressed. However, he ends the letter by concluding that he is never going to take LSD again, which indicates that he blames these feelings on taking drugs, and thereby ignores his real problems that came to the surface while doing it. Furthermore, this series of thoughts shows a fragmentation in his discourse, where his memories are disintegrating, almost like a pause in his otherwise subjective and deliberate discourse. It shows how his mind lists up different fragments of his life, in a specific order that ends with naming the person that has arguably hurt him the most, namely his Aunt Helen. These fragments are then followed by this absurd ending where he lays down and makes a snow angel, in a poem-like manner, which could symbolize his brain's attempt to push these troubling thoughts away. This clearly stands out from the rest of Charlie's discourse, as the style here shows how his thoughts disintegrate while he simultaneously becomes more aware of his underlying problems. Hence, this style of writing allows the reader to explore the narrator's subjectivity even further, as it shows his unmodified stream of consciousness, which in turn accentuates one of the strengths of the

⁷³ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 105.

⁷⁴ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 105.

epistolary form. Also, it strengthens Charlie's credibility, because his subconsciousness while writing the letter hinders him from being dishonest about his thoughts.

A few weeks after this incident, Charlie mentions that he is feeling a lot better after he has been seeing his psychiatrist. Also here, it seems like writing letters plays an important role regarding his self-realization. He starts another letter by writing that he is feeling great, which is surprising because the preceding weeks have been terrible:

I try to remind myself when I feel great like this 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 very important to try.⁷⁵

Although he does not write it explicitly, this could be interpreted as his way of saying that writing makes him more aware of his own feelings. It also indicates that writing makes him more able to reflect around what it is that is making him feel either good or bad. The therapeutic effect related to the characteristics of the epistolary form is thereby present here, because writing about his life makes Charlie more aware of what contributes to his suffering and isolation. This in turn increases his self-realization, although provisionally, in a subconscious manner.

As briefly mentioned, Charlie starts dating Mary Elizabeth, whom he meets in connection with the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. This is Charlie's first experience with dating, which naturally affects his personal development. Charlie is still in love with Sam, but because she has a boyfriend, he decides to date Mary Elizabeth. Even though he finds her nice and pretty, he also finds her very annoying and self-absorbed. Still, he does not find the courage to break up with her. Again, this shows how he just observes passively instead of speaking up:

I asked my sister what I should do, and she said the best thing to do is be honest about my feelings. My psychiatrist said the same thing. And then I felt really sad because I thought maybe I was different from how Mary Elizabeth originally saw me, too. And maybe I was lying by not telling her that it was hard to listen to her all the time

⁷⁵ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 110.

without getting to say anything back. But I was just trying to be nice like Sam said I should. I don't know where I went wrong.⁷⁶

Charlie does not know how to be honest about how he feels. However, he has no problem being honest in his letters, because the addressee does not know his real name. The epistolary form thereby allows him to write openly, which strengthens his credibility even though he is not able to be honest elsewhere. Charlie's dishonesty with Mary Elizabeth results in a serious conflict, which seems to teach him the consequences of not speaking up at the right time. While playing "truth or dare", Patrick dares Charlie to "kiss the prettiest girl in the room on the lips."⁷⁷ Obviously, everyone expects him to kiss Mary Elizabeth, but he kisses Sam instead. Charlie is then encouraged to keep away from his friends for a while. He ends that letter by writing that: "Something really is wrong with me. And I don't know what it is."⁷⁸ The absence of feeling included is now, arguably, even stronger than it was before, which makes Charlie reflect a lot around his own thoughts and behavior. The presence of absence is thereby reinforced at the end of the novel's third part, and because Charlie now has nobody to talk to, it becomes even more important to him to write letters to the addressee.

2.2.4. Part 4: April 29, 1992 – June 22, 1992

The fourth and final part of the novel starts just after the conflict between Charlie and his friends, and he is feeling more depressed than earlier. However, things suddenly change because Charlie stands up for Patrick during a fight. This symbolizes how he has gone from being a passive observer to a participator. He writes a letter about this incident, where he explains how Patrick got into a fight in the cafeteria, and how he eventually interfered to defend Patrick:

That's when I got involved. I just couldn't watch them hurt Patrick even if things weren't clear just yet. I think anyone who knew me might have been frightened or confused. (...) I don't really want to go into detail except to say that by the end of it, Brad and two of his buddies stopped fighting and just stared at me. His other two friends were lying on the ground. (...) and then I looked at Brad. I don't think we'd

⁷⁶ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 140.

⁷⁷ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 144.

⁷⁸ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 147.

ever really exchanged two words before, but I guess this was the time to start. All I said was, “If you ever do this again, I’ll tell everyone. And if that doesn’t work, I’ll blind you.”⁷⁹

After this fight, Charlie meets Sam, and she tells him that they can be friends again. Then, he promises both himself and the addressee that he is never going to mess up like that again.⁸⁰ This event, then, shows how Charlie has learnt from previous mistakes, and how his friends forgive him as soon as he starts participating more. Also, by writing about it to the addressee, and promising that he will never act like that again, it shows how Charlie uses the addressee as someone who can hold him accountable for his actions. This characteristic of the epistolary form is therefore of significance when it comes to his identity formation, as it shows the importance of having someone who reads the letters, compared to if he was to write diary entries.

When Bill, the English teacher, gives Charlie his final book to read that year, he tells Charlie to “be a filter, not a sponge” while reading it.⁸¹ One can interpret this as Bill’s way of saying that Charlie should try not to absorb everything in the book uncritically, but rather consider carefully which ideas might be helpful. In other words, he should try not to be as easily influenced by others’ thoughts and opinions, and rather focus on what is important to him. Although this conversation is about reading books, it is transferable to how impressionable Charlie is in general, as he struggles with making decisions based on what he wants, and rather adapts to others’ wants and beliefs. His way of reading books thus symbolizes how he lives his life in general, something that Bill arguably is indicating. For example, at the end of the schoolyear, Charlie starts to spend a lot of time with Patrick, because Patrick is going through a tough time: “I’ve been spending a lot of time with Patrick these days. I really haven’t said much. I just listen and nod because Patrick needs to talk.”⁸² This illustrates how he simply goes along with what he thinks other people wants him to do, instead of speaking his mind. At the end of that same letter, Charlie explains how Patrick kissed him when they were saying goodbye:

And he kissed me. A real kiss. Then, he pulled away real slow.
“I’m sorry.”

⁷⁹ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 162-163.

⁸⁰ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 165.

⁸¹ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 177.

⁸² Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 167.

“No. That’s okay.”

“Really. I’m sorry.”

“No really. It was okay.”

So, he said “thanks” and hugged me again. And moved in to kiss me again. And I just let him. I don’t know why.⁸³

This passage does not only illustrate Charlie’s inability to make choices based on his own wellbeing, but it also indicates that he struggles to participate because he is afraid of offending people. Thus, it symbolizes how he should be a filter rather than a sponge, not only while reading, but in all situations. This also correlates with the narrator’s suffering and isolation, as his suffering causes him to isolate his meanings, almost like an attempt to protect himself from causing any situation that can lead him to suffer even more. However, it seems evident that he does not interpret Bill’s advice as having relation to anything other than reading, writing that “Sometimes, I think Bill forgets that I am sixteen. But I am very happy that he does. I haven’t started reading it because I am very behind in other classes because I spent so much time with Patrick.”⁸⁴ Nevertheless, this accentuates how the epistolary form contributes to letting the reader in on how his self-realization gradually develops, although he is not yet aware of it himself.

In the final letter (before the epilogue), Sam confronts Charlie about not being honest about his feelings, and about how his passivity is holding him back. Although he has been encouraged to participate more earlier, it is necessary for him to hear this explicitly in order to develop his self-realization. During the friend groups last gathering before most of them leave for college, Charlie helps Sam pack, and she asks him why he did not ask her out when she and Craig broke up. Charlie does not really know how to respond but says that he is okay as long as she is happy.⁸⁵ This is when Sam confronts him:

Charlie, don’t you get it? I can’t feel that. It’s sweet and everything, but it’s like you’re not even there sometimes. It’s great that you can listen and be a shoulder to someone, but what about when someone doesn’t need a shoulder. What if they need

⁸³ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 172-173.

⁸⁴ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 137.

⁸⁵ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 214.

the arms or something like that? You can't just sit there and put everybody's lives ahead of yours and think that counts as love. You just can't. You have to do things.⁸⁶

After this, Sam waits for him to answer, but instead he realizes that he should just do what he wants to, instead of just thinking about it. Therefore, Charlie finally kisses Sam, something he has been wanting to do for a long time. Thus, this symbolizes how he has now finally gone from being an observer to a participator, because he has realized that not doing what he wants is holding him back and also affecting other people. This also shows the function that the epistolary form has on the reader, especially regarding the characteristic related to the narrator's subjectivity. What I mean by this, is that because the entire novel is told from Charlie's point of view, the reader mostly gets to view his thought process regarding his increasing participation. Consequently, the reader's perception of Charlie is solely a result of his own discourse. But, when Sam finally confronts him, and he writes about the conversation, the reader gets a glimpse of the other character's thoughts about him as well. However, because these thoughts are also told through Charlie's discourse, they represent how his view of himself changes. In other words, they represent his increasing self-realization. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Joe Bray argues that the epistolary form is important for representing individual psychology.⁸⁷ Thus, although Charlie's letters about these issues are subjective, it is precisely this that gives the reader the perception that he has developed as a person.

2.3. Chapter conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to analyze how Charlie in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* experiences increasing self-realization, and how the characteristics of the epistolary form contribute to this perception. By going through the novel part by part, it has become clear that Charlie experiences a major personal development, which is not only visible through the discussed events, symbols, characters, and themes, but also through his discourse in the letters. As discussed in relation to the already existing scholarship, this development is in line with the descriptions of the coming-of-age novel. The novel also brings up important themes related to mental health, as it revolves around Charlie's suffering and isolation and his many attempts to become a better version of himself. This is especially

⁸⁶ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 214.

⁸⁷ Bray, *The Epistolary Novel*, 2.

visible in relation to his journey from being a wallflower to a participant and how this contributes to both inner and outer conflicts, as well as many positive experiences, which all affect his personal development. However, as stated before the analysis, the main purpose of this discussion has been to highlight the functions that the characteristics of the epistolary form have on this perception. Based on the analysis, it is evident that the epistolary form and its belonging characteristics contribute to give the reader insight to the narrator's innermost thoughts and emotions, which would probably not have been as visible had the novel been written in a different style. Consequently, this enhances the narrator's thought process and subjectivity, which enhances the perception of his increasing self-realization and personal development.

In this discussion, I have intentionally left out a major theme of the novel, which revolves around Charlie's repressed childhood trauma from being molested by his Aunt Helen. By the end of the novel, Charlie is finally able to recall these repressed memories. This happens after he has his first real sexual experience with Sam, which he writes about in the final letter of part four. In a study about recalling traumatic events, Diana M. Elliott discusses how people who have experienced delayed recall of trauma most often have recalled the trauma in situations that were similar to the original trauma.⁸⁸ Interestingly, in Charlie's case, it seems like Sam has replaced the role of his aunt Helen, and that this is what gradually makes him remember the trauma. After this realization, he spends several months at a mental hospital, which he writes about in the novel's epilogue. Regarding the epistolary form, and the characteristic concerning the presence of absence, one could argue that Sam has filled the absence of Helen. Nevertheless, because this is such a major theme of the novel, as well as in *The Color Purple*, I will discuss this in a separate chapter and in relation to trauma studies specifically. The following chapter will be devoted to *The Color Purple*, where I will analyze its protagonist, Celie, and her increasing self-realization, based on the characteristics of the epistolary form. After doing so, I will have sufficient material to compare the two works in the chapter about representations of trauma.

⁸⁸ Diana M. Elliott, "Traumatic Events: Prevalence and Delayed Recall in the General Population". *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 65, no. 5 (1997), <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.65.5.811>

Chapter 3: *The Color Purple*

3.1. Existing scholarship on *The Color Purple*

As mentioned, a lot has been written about *The Color Purple*, but mostly the focus has been on its content rather than on its style. As in the preceding chapter, the discussion here will also bring up the novel's events, themes, and symbols, but I will focus on how the characteristics of the epistolary form are of significance regarding the narrator's increasing self-realization and the reader's perception of this. In order to situate my own reading more clearly, I will first bring up a selection of approaches that different scholars have taken, which are of relevance to my discussion. Although my discussion will have a different focus than the existing scholarship, some aspects of my reading are similar.

Much of the existing readings on *The Color Purple* focus on some major themes of the novel, like feminism, racism, sexism, sexuality, and religion. Walker herself is also concerned with these issues, as she has expressed in works like *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. This is a collection of non-fiction texts, where she expresses a "womanist" worldview and "offers a concept for achieving wisdom, hope, and change."⁸⁹ Therefore, it seems natural that the scholarship on her most well-known work, *The Color Purple*, focuses on such issues as well. For instance, Terrence Musanga and Theophilus Mukhuba argue that most African American texts, which often are written by male authors, mostly revolve around issues related to race and class. They discuss how the gendered perspective of this discussion is often neglected, and that Walker's novel is one of the few works that brings up these themes in a womanist way.⁹⁰ Furthermore, their article offers a feminist reading of the novel, with a special focus on how Celie's relationships to the different female characters affect her self-knowledge and self-identification.⁹¹ In the article "Identity and religion in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*", Mahdi Dehghani explores the interrelationship between identity formation and religion in Walker's novel. Overall, she argues that it is mainly personhood that bestows one's personal identity, and that although Walker emphasizes the role of religion in her novel, Celie cannot

⁸⁹ Oxford Reference, s.v. "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens.", last modified February 21, 2023, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100004735>.

⁹⁰ Terrence Musanga and Theophilus Mukhuba, "Toward the Survival and Wholeness of the African American Community: A Womanist Reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982)." *Journal of black studies* 50, no. 4 (2019): 389, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934719835083>.

⁹¹ Musanga and Mukhuba, "Toward the Survival and Wholeness of the African American Community".

find her identity through religion only.⁹² These articles represent only a couple of examples of a large body of work that discuss questions related to gender, race, and religion in their discussions about the novel. These are undoubtedly important themes, especially because they play an important role regarding Celie's struggle for freedom and identity.

Moreover, existing scholarship also tends to focus on Celie's identity formation and character development throughout the novel. The novel follows Celie from she is fourteen years old until she is a grown woman, and she develops majorly as a character throughout the novel. This, as discussed in the previous chapter, characterizes a *Bildungsroman*. The focus on Celie's development therefore seems to be a natural part of the discussion of the novel. Iman Hami argues that Celie goes from being a dependent and solitary character to change into "an individual, black, female character" over the course of the novel.⁹³ Furthermore, he argues that Celie's development is heavily affected by womanism and female bonding, which is visible through her relationships to other female characters. More specifically, he discusses how the character Shug Avery affects Celie, arguing that "the strong female bonding between them helps Celie to gain empowered identity so she can live independently and enjoy her individuality."⁹⁴ Thusly, he acknowledges that Celie undergoes a major development, and emphasizes Shug's role in this. Similarly, Rosli Talif and Kamelia Sedehi argue that Celie "transforms from a victim to a victor" and claim that this is a result of all the women in the novel helping each other to improve each other's lives.⁹⁵ Besides this, they also emphasize the importance of the epistolary form, and argue that both Celie and Nettie gain their independence through the use of language. Also, they claim that the female characters free themselves from limitations as a result of their increasing self-realization, which they gain from writing.⁹⁶ Thus, their discussion comes close to my argument that Celie's increasing self-realization is connected to her letter-writing, with the difference being that my discussion centers around the specific characteristics of the form and their significance on this perception, not just the importance of the genre itself.

Comparably, Shuv Raj and Rana Bhat discuss the way language is used to represent characters in *The Color Purple*, especially Celie. Although this article is more of a semantic

⁹² Mahdi Dehghani, "Identity and Religion in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 4, no. 2 (2014), <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/identity-religion-alice-walkers-color-purple/docview/1645383603/se-2>.

⁹³ Iman Hami, "Celie's Empowered Identity in Alice Walker's 'The Color Purple'." *The international journal of literary humanities* 10, no. 2 (2013): 11, <https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-7912/CGP/v10i02/43856>.

⁹⁴ Hami, «Celie's Empowered Identity», 13.

⁹⁵ Rosli Talif and Kamelia T. Sedehi. "Characters in Process in *The Color Purple*." *Procedia, social and behavioral sciences* 118 (2014): 429, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.02.058>.

⁹⁶ Talif and Sedehi, «Characters in process in *The Color Purple*», 426-431.

analysis, they still emphasize the function of the epistolary form by claiming that Celie's writing shows how she transforms from being a patient to an agent. In other words, she goes from being a helpless recipient of the actions done by the other character, to taking control over her own life with her own actions. Moreover, they argue that "Celie's alienation, silence, and suppression are evidenced in the writing style of the novel: an epistolary or letter-writing form addressed directly to the capital God (...)." ⁹⁷ Consequently, they seem to believe that there is a connection between Celie's letter-writing and her increasing self-realization, which is in line with my discussion as well. Similarly, Shiva Hemmati discusses how Celie is transforming from "the embodiment of passive and stereotyped femininity into a self-conscious woman" throughout the novel. ⁹⁸ She argues that Walker gives voice to black women who are oppressed by black men, and that she raises important questions of both race and gender oppression in her novel. Moreover, Hemmati discusses how Celie, by writing letters, not only discovers new images of God, but also manages to gradually achieve her subjective identity and self-realization. ⁹⁹ Consequently, there seems to be an agreement among the scholars that Celie's self-realization increases throughout the novel, something that is, at least partly, related to her letter-writing.

The role of the epistolary form is also briefly mentioned by some of the scholars, which indicates that some also do emphasize the importance of the genre. For instance, Kimberly S. Love argues that "the epistolary framing presents a crisis in the development of Celie's shamed self-consciousness." ¹⁰⁰ Love points to several aspects of Celie's letter-writing and discusses how Walker "manipulates" some of the characteristics of the epistolary form to represent Celie's fractured self-consciousness. ¹⁰¹ Interestingly, she discusses the relationship between Celie and God, whom Celie addresses many of her letters to. Here, she argues that:

In the first letter of the novel, Celie appeals to God as "you" for a sign that she never receives. In the final letter to this God, Celie writes "you must be sleep" to indicate God's nonresponsive nature before she begins addressing her letters to her sister

⁹⁷ Shuv Raj and Rana Bhat, Raj, Shuv, and Rana Bhat. "Celie's Transformation from Patient to Agent: A Semantic Analysis of Walker's *The Color Purple*." *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* 29, no. 2 (2016): 116-117, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0895769X.2016.1214067>.

⁹⁸ Shiva Hemmati, "Self-Consciousness in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Irigaray's Feminine Divinity." *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* 34 no. 2 (2021): 176, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0895769X.2019.1647824>.

⁹⁹ Hemmati, "Self-consciousness in Alice Walker's *the Color Purple*", 170-173.

¹⁰⁰ Kimberly S. Love, "Too Shame to Look: Learning to Trust Mirrors and Healing the Lived Experience of Shame in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." *Hypatia* 33, no. 3 (2018): 521, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12430>.

¹⁰¹ Love, «Too Shame to Look», 526.

Nettie. Due to this relative lack of a reified addressee, or separately embodied “you”, I read the God of Celie’s letters as both “I” and “you.” Simply put, Celie is both “I” and “you”, but she doesn’t recognize herself as the “you.”¹⁰²

Love’s discussion contributes to enhance the function of several of the characteristics of the epistolary form, especially regarding “the existence of an addressee”, “the presence of absence”, and “the exploration of the individual’s subjectivity”, which I formulated in the first chapter. Thus, Love touches on some of the points that I will make in my discussion of the novel as well, with the difference being that her focus is on “the role of shame in shaping the epistolary form”¹⁰³, while my focus will be on the epistolary form’s role in shaping increasing self-realization.

Like Love, Christa Rohrbach discusses the role of the epistolary form, and argues that the epistolary format allows characters of marginalized identity to “take space as vessels of power within a text”¹⁰⁴. She argues that the use of the hybrid epistolary convention in *The Color Purple* contributes to show how the characters encounter liberation or oppression. Furthermore, she argues that by using the epistolary format, Walker gives Celie’s character agency and provides her a space where she can take control of the narrative and decide what details, names, events, and characters to highlight.¹⁰⁵ In the conclusion, she states that “epistolary hybridity offers one way for authors to make space for Black female characters to take charge of the narrative and center their experiences – without appropriating them into a genre that, historically, didn’t ask for them.”¹⁰⁶ Consequently, the use of the epistolary form, which in this case mostly involves Celie’s letters, allows the narrator to take control over her own narrative, which has a significant effect on the reader’s perception of her development. Rohrbach’s discussion then, is in line with my claim that the epistolary form is of significance regarding the perception of the narrator’s increasing self-realization. However, although she includes some examples from the novel, she does not go further into detail on how this is visible through the characteristics of the form.

In her Master thesis from 2011, Maria Berg Jørgensen investigates the role of the letters in *The Color Purple* and finds that they do not only serve to give voice to a voiceless

¹⁰² Love, «Too Shame to Look», 527.

¹⁰³ Love, «Too Shame to Look», 521.

¹⁰⁴ Christa Rohrbach, “The Use of the Epistolary in *Boy Snow Bird* and *The Color Purple*: Pushing against Canonical Oppression through Hybrid Forms.” *Femspec* 20, no. 2 (2020): 47, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2467633453?pq-origsite=primo>.

¹⁰⁵ Rohrbach, “The use of the epistolary in *Boy Snow Bird* and *The Color Purple*”, 47-51

¹⁰⁶ Rohrbach, “The use of the epistolary in *Boy Snow Bird* and *The Color Purple*”, 55.

person, but that Celie's writing style also challenges the conventions of the epistolary novel.¹⁰⁷ Here, Jørgensen investigates the novel in light of different studies on the epistolary form and discusses the novel based on its style. Naturally, Jørgensen considers the novel's plot and some important themes, but her thesis mainly focuses on the letters' role in forming a narrative. However, she mostly examines whether the work is epistolary or not and compares it to traditional epistolary works such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. Although she discusses the letterform and some of its characteristics, her focus seems to be on the structure of the letters rather than on their content. Thus, my discussion will differ from hers in terms on my focus on the epistolary form's function on the perception of the narrator, rather than on the style itself.

As the above demonstrates, much of the existing scholarship on *The Color Purple* focuses on important themes in the novel, especially regarding feminism, religion, and oppression. Also, most of the scholars seem to emphasize Celie's major development throughout the novel, and how she goes from being a passive, dependent, victim to an independent woman who takes control of her own life. Furthermore, there is an agreement between the scholars that the bond between the female characters is of significance regarding this development. More specifically, many emphasize the importance of Celie's relationship with Shug Avery. Although most of the scholarship focuses on the novel's content, several scholars also emphasize the importance of the epistolary form. They agree that writing letters allows Celie to shape her own narrative, and that Walker manipulates the epistolary form in a way that allows the reader to explore Celie's subjectiveness and self-development. However, what seems to be lacking in the discussion is the exploration of what exactly it is about the epistolary form that enhances the perception of Celie's identity formation, rather than simply acknowledging the form's importance. This is what I will investigate further in my analysis, by discussing how the five characteristics of the epistolary form (which I established in the first chapter) have an important effect on the reader's perception of the narrator's development. Because I will base my analysis on the functions of these characteristics, my discussion will hopefully be adding new insights to the subject.

¹⁰⁷ Maria B. Jørgensen, "Women, Letters and the Empire: The Role of the Epistolary Narrative in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." University of Tromsø, 2011.

3.2. Character analysis of Celie in *The Color Purple*

The Color Purple is not divided into any chapter or parts, as it simply consists of a series of undated letters written by either Celie or Nettie. Therefore, I will organize the analysis according to who the letters are written by and who the addressee is. As mentioned, most of the letters in the novel, at least in its first half, are written by Celie and addressed to God. However, Nettie has been writing letters to Celie during the many years they have been apart, which Celie's husband has been hiding from her. Thus, when Celie finally finds these letters, she rearranges them in chronological order, and they become part of the novel. Then, Celie continues to address a few letters to God, until she eventually starts addressing them to Nettie instead. Consequently, the last part of the novel consists of a letter correspondence between the two sisters. It makes the most sense to arrange the analysis according to this because it helps shape a chronological order of the events in Celie's life, which in turn is of importance when analyzing her personal development. Dividing the analysis into these parts will therefore contribute to highlight how her self-realization increases letter by letter. Like in the previous chapter, I will focus on central themes, motifs, and characters, and analyze how Celie's discourse regarding these develops throughout the novel.

3.2.1. Letters from Celie to God

The novel starts with a series of rather short letters written by Celie to God. Arguably, she starts writing these letters because she is suffering and needs someone to listen to her, something that characterizes the epistolary form. This is also comparable to how Charlie makes use of the letter form, as seen in the previous chapter. The opening line of Walker's novel is a quote by Celie's father, Alphonso, who says that: "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy."¹⁰⁸ This is then followed by the novel's first letter, which is addressed to God. This indicates that Celie feels that her only choice is writing to God, because she has been threatened by her father not to talk to anyone else. In this first letter, she is only fourteen years old, and is asking God to give her a sign letting her know what is happening to her.¹⁰⁹ However, she does not seem to be fully aware of how bad she is suffering, and she continues writing about the recent events in her life, including that her father has raped her. In the next letter, she writes about her mother's death, and that "she died

¹⁰⁸ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 3.

¹⁰⁹ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 3.

screaming and cussing”¹¹⁰. She also writes that she has given birth to a child, and that her father, who also is the father of her children, has killed both her children. Interestingly, she writes about these incidents in a rather straightforward manner:

She ast me bout the first one Whose it is? I say God’s. I don’t know no other man or what else to say. When I start to hurt and then my stomach start moving and then that little baby come out my pussy chewing on it fist you could have knock me over with a feather. Don’t nobody come see us. She got sicker and sicker. Finally she ast Where it is? I say God took it. He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one too, if he can.¹¹¹

This passage shows how Celie, while giving birth, tells her mother that God is the father of her children. It seems like she wants to spare her from the truth, although her mother most likely already knows. In contrast to everyone surrounding her, Celie seems to be in somewhat denial of the severity of these actions. Thus, her discourse regarding this shows how she passively “accepts” her father’s cruelty towards her. The letterform emphasizes this perception, as it gives the reader insight to her subjective, unfiltered thoughts. Her letters offer an exploration of the individual’s subjectivity, something that contributes to give the reader an insight into how it is to be Celie. This reinforces the impression that she needs to write in order to escape from her devastating reality. Thus, it is the narrator’s suffering and isolation that drives her to write, and her unfiltered letters about her suffering lets the reader dive deep into her mind. Not only does this enhance both her suffering and her credibility as a narrator, but it shows how she writes about her own reality in a gradually more deliberate manner. Thus, as will be discussed throughout the analysis, these characteristics are of significance for the understanding of Celie’s character development.

Because Celie wants to free herself and her sister from their father, she gets married to Albert, or “Mr-----”, an older man who abuses her both physically and psychologically. Albert marries Celie because he wants her to take care of his children, his house, and work for him, although he originally wanted to marry her sister Nettie. Although Celie seems to despise Albert, and it is her father who decides who she should marry, she still considers a marriage with Albert as a better option than staying with their father:

¹¹⁰ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 4.

¹¹¹ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 4.

It took him the whole spring, from March to June, to make up his mind to take me. All I thought about was Nettie. How she could come to me if I marry him and he be so love struck with her I could figure out a way for us to run away. Us both be hitting Nettie's schoolbooks pretty hard, cause us know we got to be smart to git away.¹¹²

Here, Celie explains how she and Nettie is reading and preparing to run away from Albert. Also, because he has expressed an interest in Nettie, she writes that bringing her to stay with them will help them escape, because he will be too busy being "love struck with her". In other words, Celie sees this marriage as an opportunity to free herself from the suffering and isolation she is experiencing by living with her father, and, somewhat naively, believes that reading will help them escape. Interestingly, though, it seems like it is this hope that helps her carry on, which in turn is what drives her to write these letters to God. Additionally, the characteristic regarding the presence of absence presents itself here, something that arguably affects Celie's discourse. As discussed earlier, the presence of absence, either in a physical or abstract form, often drives the narrator of epistolary works to write letters. In this case, one could argue that it is a combination of both forms of absence that motivates Celie's letter-writing. She is physically separated from her deceased mother and from her children that she believes to be dead, something that reinforces her aloneness. However, she is also lacking more basic psychological needs, as everyone except from her sister treats her as she is nothing. She seems to be somewhat aware of this as well, something that becomes visible in a letter where she writes about a conversation between Albert and Harpo: "Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr----- say, Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for – he don't finish. He just tuck his chin over the paper like he do. Remind me of Pa."¹¹³ This shows how all the men in Celie's life suppress her and take away her freedom, and that she is able to see this connection herself. Hence, it is not only the absence of physical people, but also the absence of caring people, that drives Celie to write letters.

After marrying Albert, Celie is busy taking care of him and his demanding children, and although they mistreat her, she is not able to stand up for herself. Still, she passively agrees to their mistreatment of her because she believes that this is best for her and Nettie. Celie writes about how she has spent her wedding day taking care of Albert's four children, and how the night ends with Albert abusing her:

¹¹² Walker, *The Color Purple*, 11.

¹¹³ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 23.

I start trying to untangle hair. They only six and eight and they cry. They scream. They cuse me of murder. By ten o'clock I'm done. They cry theirselves to sleep. But I don't cry. I lay there thinking bout Nettie while he on top of me, wonder if she safe.¹¹⁴

In another letter, Celie explains how her stepchildren are mean to her, and that Nettie encourages her to fight back. She answers Nettie that she does not know how to fight, and that the only thing she knows how to do is staying alive.¹¹⁵ When Albert demands Nettie to leave, Nettie tells Celie that she hates to leave her with her husband and his children, and that seeing her with them is like "seeing her buried".¹¹⁶ Celie then writes: "It's worse than that, I think. If I was buried, I wouldn't have to work. But I just say, Never mine, never mine, long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along."¹¹⁷ Then, she asks if Nettie can write her letters when she leaves. This indicates that, for Celie, living with her husband and being without her sister is worse than death, but that she can survive as long as she can write to God and Nettie. This shows how letter-writing has a therapeutic effect on Celie, which is typical for the epistolary form. It also indicates that the letters fill a void in Celie's life, as also her sister now becomes absent from her. The characteristics connected to absence and the narrator's suffering and isolation is therefore connected to Celie's letter-writing, which in turn function to strengthen the perception that she needs to write in order to keep herself alive.

Celie's stepson, Harpo, gets married to Sofia, who inspires Celie to stand up for herself, and thereby affects her identity formation. Sofia is a strong, independent woman who speaks her mind and fights back when someone tries to mistreat her. Her character arguably functions as a symbol of what Celie wishes to be. In one letter, Celie explains how Harpo is complaining because Sofia never does what he says and always talks back to him, and his father then encourages him to beat her. Celie then writes that she likes Sofia, but that she does not believe that it is mutual: "I think bout how every time I jump when Mr----- call me, she look surprise. And like she pity me."¹¹⁸ This indicates that Sofia does not like Celie, because she cannot understand how she passively accepts her husband's cruelty. Surprisingly, when Harpo asks Celie what he should do about Sofia, she tells him to beat her. Sofia then confronts Celie about this, and Celie writes about their conversation: "I say it cause I'm a fool, I say. I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't. What that? She

¹¹⁴ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 14

¹¹⁵ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 18.

¹¹⁶ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 19.

¹¹⁷ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 19.

¹¹⁸ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 36.

say. Fight. I say.”¹¹⁹ After this, Sofia asks Celie what she does whenever she gets mad, and she answers:

I think. I can't even remember the last time I felt mad, I say. I used to git mad at my mammy cause she put a lot of work on me. Then I see how sick she is. Couldn't stay mad at her. Couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what. Then after while every time I got mad, or start to feel mad, I got sick. Felt like throwing up. Terrible feeling. Then I start to feel nothing at all.¹²⁰

This passage shows how Celie has never let herself reflect around her feelings, and simply carried on, because that has felt like the only choice. This conversation with Sofia seems to be a breakthrough, because it is the first time Celie must process, and carefully articulate, her own emotions. After this conversation, Celie also writes that she now sleeps like a baby¹²¹, which proves how this incident has affected her positively. However, although this marks a change, this change arguably happens subconsciously in Celie's mind. Evidently, this underlines how the epistolary form contributes to a unique exploration of the individual's subjectivity, as Celie's discourse regarding this is somewhat straightforward, while the casual reader would interpret this as a major character development. This is especially visible if one examines the language itself, and how Celie's syntax changes in line with the events that contribute to her development. Although the letters are written in an ungrammatically and abrupt manner, her syntax still changes as the letters proceed. This is especially visible through the length of the letters, which increases significantly from the first letter and throughout the novel. Although she continues to write ungrammatically, Walker even highlights Celie's poor language skills in the first letter by adding a corrective mark, and her grammar gradually seems to improve slightly. However, the fact that Celie writes poorly also contributes to give the impression that the letters are written by her, and not the actual author, something that in turn makes her a more credible narrator. Thus, the letterform strengthens the narrator's credibility, as well as it gives the reader an insight into Celie's brain. This would arguably not have been as convincing if the novel had been written grammatically correct or in a different form. This also lets the reader follow Celie's writing development, something that contributes to an even deeper exploration of the individual's subjectivity, as Celie's

¹¹⁹ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 39.

¹²⁰ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 40.

¹²¹ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 41.

developing syntax mirrors her developing cognitive process. Consequently, as in the preceding passage, she gradually writes about her feelings in a more deliberate manner, and the subjectiveness of the letterform plays an important role in giving the reader this impression.

As briefly mentioned, Shug Avery deeply affects Celie and her identity formation. Shug is a blues singer, who also happens to be Albert's lover. She is a confident woman, who does not let anyone, including Albert, tell her what to do. Although she does not treat Celie that kindly at first, their relationship develops quickly, and Shug arguably becomes Celie's greatest role model. Shug is very ill when she first comes to stay with Albert and Celie, and Celie is the one that must take care of her. Shug acts very disrespectfully towards Celie, but interestingly, Celie still idolizes her and wants her to stay with them. She writes about a conversation with Harpo, where they discuss their marriages and how Sofia does not care about anything Harpo says. Harpo says that a wife is supposed to care, and Celie then asks him about Shug and Mr-----: "Do Shug Avery mind Mr-----? I ast. She the woman he wanted to marry. She call him Albert, tell him his drawers stink in a minute. Little as he is, when she git her weight back she can sit on him if he try to bother her."¹²² This passage shows Celie's awareness of the power Shug holds over her husband. Not long after, Shug is going to perform, and Albert does not want Celie to come. When Shug contradicts him, he replies: "My wife can't do this. My wife can't do that. No wife of mines (...)." ¹²³ Shug then answers: "Good thing I aint your damn wife."¹²⁴ During Shug's performance, she sings a song that she has called "Miss Celie's song", which Celie writes is about "no count man doing her wrong."¹²⁵ Celie then writes that this is "First time somebody made something and name it after me."¹²⁶ This arguably symbolizes how Shug stands up for Celie, and gives her a voice, because she is not able to speak up for herself. It also indicates that it is the first time someone acknowledges Celie's worth and shows gratitude towards her.

Shug and Celie also develop a romantic relationship, and in addition to teaching Celie to stand up for herself, Shug also teaches her to accept herself, her feelings, and her own sexuality. Celie's discourse regarding these matters is of significance for the reader's understanding of her increasing self-realization, as it shows how she develops into a more independent woman. This development is particularly visible in the way she writes about her

¹²² Walker, *The Color Purple*, 61.

¹²³ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 69.

¹²⁴ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 69

¹²⁵ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 70.

¹²⁶ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 70.

sexual relations with both Albert and Shug. For instance, she writes about a conversation where Sofia is complaining about her sex life and Celie is trying to comfort her:

Now now, I say. Sleep on it some, maybe it come back. But I say this just to be saying something. I don't know nothing bout it. Mr----- clam on top of me, do his business, in ten minutes us both sleep. Only time I feel something stirring down there is when I think bout Shug.¹²⁷

This illustrates how Celie passively lets her husband use her for his own pleasure. The way she writes about this indicates that she believes this to be normal and therefore accepts it. In a later letter she writes about a conversation with Shug, where they discuss their relationships to Albert. Shug says that she enjoys sleeping with Albert, while Celie says that she does not like it at all. Celie explains to her that most times she pretends that she is not there while she lets him “do his business”, which provokes a reaction from Shug:

She start to laugh. Do his business, she say. Do his business. Why, Miss Celie. You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you. That what it feel like, I say. She stop laughing. You never enjoy it at all? She ast, puzzle. Not even with your children daddy? Never, I say. Why Miss Celie, she say, you still a virgin. What? I ast.¹²⁸

After this, Shug teaches Celie how a sexual experience is supposed to be, which is something that no one has told her before. Celie's discourse regarding this clearly indicates that this is the first time she realizes that the way she has been treated by men is wrong and abnormal. This accentuates the significant role of the epistolary form, as it is precisely Celie's unfiltered words that show how her reflection around these circumstances evolves. This echoes with Linda S. Kauffman's argument (as discussed in the first chapter) that it is Celie's inability to express her fears and powerlessness combined with the nonjudgmental and reportorial style that informs the reader about her suffering, as well as giving the novel its pathos.¹²⁹

Accordingly, the form exposes how Celie is unable to understand the severity of things, while like in this example, Shug understands it very well. However, it is this pathos and credibility

¹²⁷ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 63.

¹²⁸ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 74.

¹²⁹ Kauffman, *Special Delivery*, 188.

that the narrator expresses through her subjective and simple discourse that makes her identity formation exceptionally noticeable.

Further into the novel, Celie writes about another conversation with Shug, which seems to be crucial in making Celie realize the significance of the brutal acts that have been done to her. She tells her about how her father raped her when she was fourteen and explains how scared she felt. Shug is quiet at first, but then she starts crying, something that makes Celie express her emotions even further:

Oh, Miss Celie, she say. And put her arms around me. They black and smooth and kind of glowy from the lamplight. I start to cry too. I cry and cry and cry. Seem like it all come back to me, laying there in Shug arms. How it hurt and how much I was surprise. How it stung while I finish trimming his hair. How the blood drip down my leg and mess up my stocking. How de don't never look at me straight after that. And Nettie. (...) My mama die, I tell Shug. My sister Nettie run away. Mr----- come git me to take care of his rotten children. He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me, I say. She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth.¹³⁰

This passage is from one of the letters that Celie writes just before she finds the hidden letters from Nettie and starts readdressing her letters. Compared to the preceding letters, this clearly represents a change in Celie's discourse, as well as in her self-realization. Not only does this illustrate how she becomes more aware of the severity of the mentioned actions, but it also represents a development in her discourse regarding these. As discussed earlier, her language is still broken and ungrammatical, but she is now able to express her feelings in a much more deliberate manner, simultaneously as she realizes that she deserves to be treated better. Also, when Celie finds out that Albert has been hiding Nettie's letter, she becomes so furious that she tells Shug that she wants to kill him, and Shug tries to calm her down: "Naw, I think I feel better if I kill him, I say. I feels sickish. Numb, now. Naw you won't. Nobody feel better for killing nothing. They feel *something* is all. That better than nothing."¹³¹ This also contributes to give the reader the perception that Celie has now started to fight and stand up for herself and is finally able to actively express her emotions. Interestingly, the passages here visualize

¹³⁰ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 102-103.

¹³¹ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 129.

how Celie's memories are incorporating into one. This is especially visible in the longer passage, where Celie first writes about her father, then her mother's death, then her sister, and lastly about Albert's mistreatment of her. This unmodified stream of consciousness, then, illustrates how the letterform functions to enhance the impression that Celie's self-realization increases. Her discourse here shows how the different reasons behind her suffering and isolation, which have previously been somewhat neglected, are now summarized or mentioned as a whole, by herself. This development will be even more visible in the following parts, where I will analyze the letters between Nettie and Celie. Although the focus of my discussion is on Celie's development and discourse, it is necessary to include aspects of Nettie's letters in the reading as well, as these include crucial information that not only affect Celie's personal growth, but also her discourse in the succeeding letters. Therefore, I will mention these wherever relevant, although the analysis will concentrate on Celie's letters.

3.2.2. Letters between Celie and Nettie

Celie is relieved when she finds Nettie's letters, because she thought she was dead after decades without hearing from her. After finding the letters, she arranges them by date, and they are presented to the reader. In one of the letters, Nettie explains how it feels pointless to write to Celie, because Albert is going to hide the letters from her anyway. She then remembers something Celie once said, which inspires her to keep writing:

I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was. Well, now I know what you meant. And whether God will read letters or no, I know you will go on writing them; which is guidance enough for me. Anyway, when I don't write to you I feel as bad as I do when I don't pray, locked up in myself and choking on my own heart. I am so *lonely*, Celie.¹³²

Not only does this underline that letter writing has a therapeutic effect on Nettie, and that she is writing to distance herself from her suffering and loneliness. It also confirms that Celie started writing her letters because she was too ashamed about her life to speak about it to anyone. This enhances how the form's characteristic connected to the existence of an

¹³² Walker, *The Color Purple*, 117.

addressee functions to hold the narrator accountable for her actions. What I mean by this, is that even though God might not read Celie's letters, her belief or hope that someone does read them encourages her to keep on writing, which in turn is good for her mental health. Also, as Nettie writes, writing distances her from locking up her emotions, which is why she continues doing it. The letter writing thereby allows them to process their emotions, which is of importance for the development of their self-realization, and for the reader's understanding of this.

Nettie's letters reveal important things concerning Celie's life, including that her children are alive, and that Alphonso is not Celie and Nettie's biological father. The lies she has been told about her family, and especially about her father and children, have intensified her suffering. These revelations impact Celie's self-realization considerably, as she now knows the full truth about her life. After learning this, Celie writes her final letter addressed to God:

Dear God,

That's it, say Shug. Pack your stuff. You coming back to Tennessee with me. But I feels daze. My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa. You must be sleep.¹³³

In this short letter, Celie seems to be in shock, and incapable of expressing herself properly. However, she is still able to summarize the different news in a rather short and precise manner, focusing on the information that is of importance and filtering out everything else. Her stream of consciousness contributes to give the reader the impression that she is processing the information, although maybe subconsciously, as if she is not aware that this has a great impact on her self-realization. Her simple, and somewhat childlike, discourse regarding these disclosures function to give the reader insight to her thought process, and thereby explore her subjectivity. Thus, the form strengthens the perception of Celie's major identity formation.

The fact that Celie ends this particular letter by writing that God must be asleep indicates that she is finally aware of her life's injustices, and thereby incapable in believing that God is listening to her or helping her. This further proves how narrators in epistolary novels often write letters because they need someone to listen to them, because it has a

¹³³ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 160.

therapeutic effect, or because they need someone to hold them accountable. This is also coherent with Ruth Perry's claim that epistolary novels revolve around the characters' suffering and isolation, and that the stories end when their disturbing realities have improved.¹³⁴ However, in Celie's case, the letter writing does not end here, but she starts addressing her letters to Nettie instead, which is arguably a consequence of her increasing ability to stand up for herself. In the next letter Celie writes after she stops addressing them to God, she tells Nettie that she and Shug has visited Pa, whom she wanted to see for the first time in her life¹³⁵. She explains how she has confronted him, and, with help from Shug, asked him questions about her family. Although he answers her questions honestly, he does not offer her any apology, and he seems to be unbothered about his cruel treatment of her. Her next letter starts like this: "Dear Nettie, I don't write to God no more, I write to you."¹³⁶ Celie then tells Nettie about her conversation with Shug about God:

What God do for me? I ast. She say, Celie! Like she shock. He gave you life, good health, and a good woman that love you to death. Yeah, I say, and he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown.¹³⁷

This passage illustrates how Celie is finally able to stand up for herself. She no longer accepts the cruelty performed by the men in her life, something that is visible in her discourse regarding this. As can be seen from this passage, she has developed from being a passive victim to actively taking control of her own life. Although Celie is still suffering, her increasing self-realization drives her to make these changes, something that would arguably not have been as visible if there had not existed an addressee in the first place.

Celie is finally able to leave Albert, something that symbolizes her remarkable development as a character. Again, she needs Shug help to confront Albert, but when Shug has told him they are leaving, Celie has gained enough courage to speak her mind:

¹³⁴ Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel*, 114-116.

¹³⁵ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 161.

¹³⁶ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 173.

¹³⁷ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 173.

Celie is coming to Memphis with me. Over my dead body, Mr----- say. (...) He look over at me. I thought you was finally happy, he say. What wrong now? You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need. Say what? He ast. Shock. All round the table folkses mouths be dropping open. You took my sister Nettie away from me, I say. And she was the only person love me in the world. Mr----- start to sputter. ButButButButBut. Sound like some kind of motor. But Nettie and my children coming home soon, I say. And when she do, all us together gon whup your ass.¹³⁸

Not only does this passage show that Celie is standing up for herself, but it also shows how her hope of being reunited with her sister and children is motivating this action. Now that Celie has reasons to believe that she will be meeting them again, she has arguably found inspiration to take control over her unbearable situation, by speaking up instead of just writing. In other words, the fact that she now sees a future is visualized in her real life, and not just through the boundaries of the letters. Her discourse here shows how the absence of her loved ones has affected her suffering and isolation, but that she is finally able to actively take control of her life now that she believes that there will no longer be a distance between them.

After moving to Memphis, Celie starts a business where she sews pants. This newfound passion can be interpreted as a symbol of her newfound freedom and happiness. Her business is growing rapidly, and she is making a living for herself. She writes to Nettie: "Dear Nettie, I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you alive and be home soon. With our children."¹³⁹ Celie's credibility as a narrator is of significance when it comes to expressing her happiness to the reader. The letterform allows her to write her exact feelings, in the simplest way possible, as is visible in this example. This credibility is extended even further in this letter, when she writes about a woman who is helping her with her business and explains how she is trying to teach Celie how to talk: "She say us not so hot. A dead country give-away. You say US where most folks say WE, she say, and peoples think you dumb. Colored peoples think you a hick and white folks be amuse. What I care? I ast. I'm happy."¹⁴⁰ Then she writes: "Look like to me only a fool would want

¹³⁸ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 180.

¹³⁹ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 194.

¹⁴⁰ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 194.

you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind.”¹⁴¹ The fact that Celie states that she finds it odd to speak in a way that feels unnatural to her indicates that this is transferable to her writing as well. As discussed, this is already visible through her rather poor writing skills, but her discourse here also shows that she would not write about anything in a dishonest matter. Thus, the credibility that she achieves through the epistolary format does not only enhance the perception that she is an honest narrator, but her stronger opinions also contribute to the perception that her self-realization is increasing letter by letter. This is also comparable to the character development of Charlie in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, as also he states that people who use words that do not come natural to them are insincere, which makes him appear as an honest narrator.

As the novel comes to an end, Celie and Albert develop a friendship due to their common grief. Celie’s journey from hating Albert to being able to befriend him, or at least tolerate him, mirrors her journey from being a victim to an independent woman. Celie is grieving because Shug has left her to stay with a man, and she finds comfort in speaking with Albert who can relate to the feeling of losing Shug to somebody else. She also finds comfort in writing about this to Nettie, although she is not sure if she is alive:

I talk to myself a lot, standing in front the mirror. Celie, I say, happiness was just a trick in your case. Just cause you never had any before Shug, you thought it was time to have some, and that it was gon last. Even though you had the trees with you. The whole earth. The stars. But look at you. When Shug left, happiness desert. (...) Mr----- seem to be the only one understand my feeling. I know you hate me from keeping you from Nettie, he say. And now she dead. But I don’t hate him, Nettie. And I don’t believe you dead.¹⁴²

Although Celie is now reexperiencing the feelings of suffering and isolation, her discourse regarding this shows that she is now able to articulate her emotions more deliberately. As this passage shows, she expresses her emotions loudly to herself, and to Albert. Again, the letterform plays an important role in portraying this, as her discourse regarding this lets the reader into her subjective thoughts, where she tries to convince herself that she is unworthy of happiness. Also, although this change seems to happen subconsciously in Celie’s mind, her development seems to be visible for other people, including Albert: “took me long enough to

¹⁴¹ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 195.

¹⁴² Walker, *The Color Purple*, 235.

notice you such good company, he say. And he laugh. He ain't Shug, but he begin to be somebody I can talk to. And no matter how much the telegram said you must be drown, I still git letters from you."¹⁴³ Hence, the way she openly writes about these conversations to her sister gives the reader an insight to her subjective, but changing, discourse regarding the people in her life, which is crucial for displaying her personal growth.

The novel ends with a letter where Celie writes that she has been reunited with her sister and her children. That this is the last letter indicates that she no longer needs to write, because her suffering and isolation has ended, and the people who have been absent from her have returned. Thus, the factors that have driven her to write letters are no longer as present, which turns the story to an end. This resonates with Perry's argument that epistolary novels end when the narrator's disturbing reality has improved, as discussed earlier. Interestingly, Celie addresses this final letter to several "addressees", including God: "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God. Thank you for bringing my sister Nettie and our children home."¹⁴⁴ As previously discussed, she stopped addressing her letters to God, because all her misery led her to believe that God could not be listening to her. However, now that her wishes have been fulfilled, and she is finally happy, her belief in God has also reappeared. This accentuates the functions of several of the characteristics of the epistolary form, especially the ones regarding the presence of absence, the existence of an addressee, and the narrator's suffering and isolation. The existence of these characteristics throughout the novel have contributed to enhance the perception that Celie has needed to write letters in order to escape from her reality, or at worst, in order to survive. When these characteristics are now no longer present, it indicates that her self-realization has developed substantially, and that she is now able face her reality without having to write letters. Thus, the characteristics of the epistolary form have a significant effect on the reader's perception that Celie's self-realization is increasing as a result of her letter writing.

3.3. Chapter conclusion

The intention of this chapter was to analyze how the characteristics of the epistolary form contribute to the perception of Celie's increasing self-realization in *The Color Purple*. Her character develops from being a suffering, voiceless, fourteen-year-old girl to a grown woman who actively stands up for herself and takes control of her own life. By going through the

¹⁴³ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 250.

¹⁴⁴ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 259.

novel and examining the letters, it has become clear that Celie experiences a major personal development, and that her self-realization increases significantly from the first to the last letter. This is evident in several aspects of her discourse. Not only does her grammar and syntax change, as her sentences become longer and more advanced, but her discourse regarding the people and events in her life also changes. This is especially visible through her discourse regarding Albert. She goes from writing about him in an angry, hateful manner, to being able to write about him in a more understanding and friendly way. Although she does not seem to have forgotten, or forgiven, what he has done, some sort of reconciliation has occurred between the two. This shows how Celie, throughout the novel, has developed personally, and thereby has become able to come to terms with her past. Her letters about Shug also show how she gradually becomes more independent and able to articulate her emotions more directly. Shug, as well as the other female characters, plays an important role in this, as she stands up for Celie and encourages her to fight for herself. As the novel comes to an end, it seems like Celie has finally found happiness and inner peace, as she is reunited with her family members and no longer lives with her abusive husband. Thus, Celie undoubtedly experiences a major character development, and her self-realization increases significantly.

Based on my analysis, it is evident that all five characteristics of the genre are of significance when it comes to portraying an increase in Celie's self-realization. Her unfiltered and honest letters about her miserable life do not only give her pathos and credibility as a narrator, but they also let the reader explore her innermost thoughts and feelings, which contribute to reflect how her thoughts change in a unique way. The absence of her loved ones, and thereby also the absence of someone who cares about her, also drives Celie to write letters, which enhances how she writes as an attempt to bear all her suffering, or at worst to survive. The existence of, and especially the variation of addressees, also contributes to highlight how Celie's thoughts changes, and what it is that is important to her at the time of writing. The fact that she first writes to God, then dismisses him, and then addresses the final letter to God again, shows the reader how her hope and happiness develops in line with her letter writing. Thus, although the developing storyline itself gives the reader the impression that Celie experiences a major personal development, the epistolary form and its belonging characteristics are of significance for portraying her increasing self-realization, as they all contribute to enhance her subjectivity and her changing thoughts and feelings.

As in the previous chapter, I have intentionally left out an important part of the discussion in this chapter as well. Both Celie and Charlie have experienced sexual molestation

by family members at a young age, which is among the main reasons for their suffering and isolation. Although their situations are very different, the narrators of the two novels still have in common that they are victims of sexual abuse. However, it must be said that their experiences are of course very different, and the purpose of my forthcoming discussion is not to compare the traumas themselves, but rather to compare how these traumas are represented in the two characters' letters. These experiences, although arguably subconsciously, lead both characters to write letters, because writing about their feelings and experiences to someone who does not judge has a therapeutic effect on them. The next chapter will therefore revolve around Celie's and Charlie's trauma, where I will discuss relevant literary trauma theory and compare the two novels based on how their trauma is represented in their letters. I will also discuss how this in turn connects to the characteristics of the epistolary form.

Chapter 4: Representations of trauma in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and *The Color Purple*

4.1. Interpreting trauma in literature

According to the American Psychological Association, trauma is “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster.”¹⁴⁵ In the introduction chapter to *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja discuss the relation between literature and trauma, and they define “trauma” as “psychological injury, lasting damage done to individuals or communities by tragic events or severe distress.”¹⁴⁶ They also discuss how victims of traumatic experiences have wanted to talk and write about trauma, and that literature is an important forum for discussing issues connected to it.¹⁴⁷ Although Charlie and Celie are fictional characters, this observation is still transferable to them, as they write letters because they want to talk about their trauma, or at least about the things they go through that make them suffer. In the article “Trauma Within the Limits of Literature”, Geoffrey Hartman argues that trauma is a result of an experience that has not fully passed into the victim’s consciousness.¹⁴⁸ He further discusses the relation between trauma and literature and argues that there is a relation between words and wounds. Regarding trauma study as a literary endeavor, he argues that: “Its main focus is on words that wound, and presumably can be healed, if at all, by further words.”¹⁴⁹ In other words, putting words on one’s thoughts and feelings regarding one’s experienced trauma can have a therapeutic effect. In this regard, Hartman also argues that there is a connection between writing about trauma and personal development. This is also transferable to Celie and Charlie, as they write letters as an attempt to heal their wounds, which results in them developing personally.

Also relevant to this discussion is Michelle Balaev’s definition of trauma, which is “a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society.”¹⁵⁰ She discusses the trends in literary trauma theory and argues that popular trauma theory depends upon the

¹⁴⁵ “Trauma”, American Psychological Association, last modified April 08, 2023, <https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma>.

¹⁴⁶ Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, “Introduction to Literary Trauma Studies”. In *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, Eds. Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja. London: Routledge, 2020, 1.

¹⁴⁷ Davis and Meretoja, “Introduction to Literary Trauma Studies”, 1.

¹⁴⁸ Geoffrey Hartman, “Trauma Within the Limits of Literature.” *European Journal of English Studies* 7, no.3 (2003): 257, <https://doi.org/10.1076/ejes.7.3.257.27984>.

¹⁴⁹ Hartman, “Trauma Within the Limits of Literature”, 259.

¹⁵⁰ Michelle Balaev, “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory.” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 41, no. 2 (2008): 150, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44029500>.

abreactive trauma model, a Freudian concept of trauma and memory. According to Balaev, this revolves around the belief that a traumatic experience creates a “temporal gap”, and a “dissolution of the self”. In other words, a traumatic experience can, in different degrees, create damage on the individual’s consciousness and their sense of self. She further discusses how different scholars’ formulations of trauma and memory, which are based on the abreactive model, have become important sources for interpreting trauma in literature. Overall, this theory claims that trauma is known solely through repetitive flashbacks that literally reenact the event, because the mind is not able to represent it otherwise.¹⁵¹ Thus, conventional trauma theory highlights the relationship between trauma and memory, and claims that traumatic experiences can lead to fragmentations in one’s memory. This view of trauma theory is relevant when analyzing how Charlie’s trauma is represented in his letters, as he has lost all memories related to the molestation.

Furthermore, Balaev argues that in trauma novels, the traumatized protagonist may experience self-estrangement, because the traumatic experience disrupts the protagonist’s reality. The protagonist must therefore reorganize themselves in order to adjust to this new reality. She further argues that this adjustment is sometimes successful, but for some protagonists, it becomes impossible to find relief or remedy.¹⁵² In other words, the traumatized protagonist often experiences a shift in their consciousness and struggles to adapt to their life after the traumatic event has taken place. Moreover, she argues that this change in the protagonist’s consciousness is a result of the protagonist’s search for previous truths, which takes them on a transformative journey that can often be painful. Consequently, she claims that the fictional protagonist often responds to traumatic events with turning inward and thereby struggle with the past, while simultaneously becoming more aware of the external world.¹⁵³ Trauma therefore becomes both a personal and cultural experience, as the protagonist must turn inward as well as having to readjust to their surrounding cultural context. This approach to analyzing traumatized characters functions as a supplement to the typical approach which highlights the relation between trauma and memory, as trauma can be represented in other forms than flashbacks of the event. Thus, Balaev’s discussion is relevant when analyzing how Celie’s trauma is represented through her letters, as she tries to adjust to her new reality while simultaneously trying to find remedy within herself and accept her past.

¹⁵¹ Balaev, “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory”, 150-151.

¹⁵² Balaev, “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory”, 162.

¹⁵³ Balaev, “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory”, 164-164.

With the preceding scholarship in mind, it is evident that trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event, which can cause lasting damage to the individual. Several of the scholars also emphasize how literature can work as a forum for discussing issues related to trauma. Balaev's discussion also suggests that trauma can represent itself in different ways in literature. Some of the most common ways this represents itself is either through repetitive flashbacks that reenact the event, or through a disruption in the protagonist's reality that forces them to adjust to the new reality by turning inward and searching for answers or inner peace.

In Charlie's case, his trauma arguably represents itself in both these ways. He is traumatized by being molested by his aunt as a child, and his repressed memories of this gradually represent themselves through his discourse as he writes about other kinds of sexual encounters. He is also traumatized by the death of his aunt, and the suicide of his best friend Michael. It seems as if he tries to handle these tragedies by turning inward, as well as trying to adapt to his new reality which involves starting high school without any friends. In Celie's case, her trauma mostly represents itself in the way that she is trying to accept or come to terms with her past, as well as trying to handle the abuse that is taking place as she is writing. The traumatic experiences from her past involve being raped by her father and giving birth to his children, as well as losing her mother and being forced to marry a man that mistreats her. She has also been separated from her sister Nettie, whom she for a long period of time believes to be dead. As she is trying to accept her past, she is simultaneously trying to adjust to her new life at her husband's farm, and everything that comes with it. Although the abuse by her father has now stopped, she is still experiencing abuse and violence by the new people she is surrounded with. Thus, the way her trauma represents itself in her discourse is not only connected to her past experiences, but in the way that she is trying to work through the still ongoing abuse. Compared to Charlie, whose trauma mostly seems to be a result of his aunt Helen's actions, it is more difficult to determine one specific cause for Celie's trauma. However, as stated earlier, the purpose of this chapter is not to compare their actual trauma, but rather to compare how their trauma is represented through their subjective letters. In Charlie's case the focus will be on the actions done to him by his aunt Helen, and in Celie's case the focus will be on the actions done to her by her (step)father Alphonso and her husband Albert. When analyzing Charlie's letters, I will discuss the way he touches upon, or circles around, the trauma in his discourse, without understanding where this is coming from or what it actually is that he remembers. This is different when analyzing Celie's letters, as she definitely remembers the trauma, and the way it is represented in her letters is visible through

her increasing literacy where she gradually writes about the trauma in a more articulate manner. This approach to the discussion will, hopefully, also contribute to emphasize the importance of the epistolary form, as the focus is on the characters' discourse in their letters, and not on the actual plots of the novels themselves.

4.2. Representations of trauma in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and *The Color Purple*

Charlie idolizes his late aunt Helen already in the first letter of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, which indicates that she occupies his thoughts extensively, without him being aware of the reason why. As discussed, Charlie begins this letter by explaining why he feels the need to write and goes on to inform the addressee about Michael's suicide and his own reaction to this. He then starts writing about his family, and the letter quickly evolves to center around his aunt Helen:

My Aunt Helen was my favorite person in the whole world. She was my mom's sister. She got straight A's when she was a teenager and she used to give me books to read. (...) My Aunt Helen lived with the family for the last few years of her life because something very bad happened to her. Nobody would tell me what happened then even though I always wanted to know.¹⁵⁴

This passage illustrates that Helen likely was a complicated person who struggled to take care of herself, and that Charlie is unable to realize this. He refers to her as his favorite person in the world, and as the letter continues, he sympathizes with her and writes that "Some people really do have it a lot worse than I do. They really do."¹⁵⁵ This shows how he has fully repressed all memories of the molestation, which agrees with Hartman's argument that trauma is a result of an experience that has not fully passed into the victim's consciousness.¹⁵⁶ Interestingly, though, Charlie seems to mention his aunt whenever he is writing about something difficult or sad. In this case, he writes about his friend's suicide, and suddenly changes the subject to revolve around Helen. This subconscious change of subject continues to happen throughout the novel. His discourse is thereby consistent with the trauma theory

¹⁵⁴ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 6-7.

¹⁵⁵ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 7.

¹⁵⁶ Hartman, "Trauma Within the Limits of Literature", 257.

that emphasizes how the narrator often turns inward in search for answers about the past, as he constantly mentions Helen as a response to something sad that he has written about. Thus, his trauma represents itself already in the first letter through his mentions of Helen.

Celie's discourse in the first letter of *The Color Purple* illustrates how her recent trauma has disrupted her consciousness. This first letter begins with a somewhat messy and unconsidered stream of consciousness concerning the recent events in her life. Her poor literacy skills make it rather difficult to understand what exactly it is she is trying to say, although it is still clear that she is struggling. First, it seems like she is writing about her sick mother and how her younger siblings are bothering her. Then, she goes on to write about her father and how he has raped her:

He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say you gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. But I don't never git used to it. And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook.¹⁵⁷

Although her discourse is messy, it is still evident that she is describing how her father rapes her, which seems to still be ongoing. However, unlike Charlie, she does not elaborate further on her feelings regarding this, except from writing that she does not get used to it, and that she feels sick. This could be due to her poor writing skills, but also due to her inability to think clearly about her disturbing reality. Regardless of the reason, her trauma clearly represents itself already in this letter.

Another way that Charlie's trauma is present in his letters is through his fixation on some of the other characters who remind him of, or have similar traits, as his aunt Helen. One of these characters is his English teacher Bill, who arguably reminds Charlie of Helen because he gives Charlie books to read, just like Helen used to do. Bill also seems to favor Charlie over his other students, which is comparable to how his aunt seemingly used to favor him over his siblings. As mentioned in the quote from the first letter, Helen used to give Charlie books to read.¹⁵⁸ He writes that his father used to think that the books were too old for him, but that he liked them and continued to read them.¹⁵⁹ As discussed in the chapter about this

¹⁵⁷ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 3.

¹⁵⁸ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 7.

¹⁵⁹ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 7.

novel, Bill gives Charlie books to read throughout the school year, because he thinks he is skilled at reading and writing. The fact that Bill gives Charlie attention and acknowledges his talents seems to mean a lot to Charlie, especially because not many adults in his life except from Helen has given him much attention. In this sense, one could argue that Bill has replaced Helen's role in Charlie's life. Near the novel's end, Charlie visits Bill and his girlfriend at their house. Here, Bill expresses how much he appreciates Charlie: "Charlie. Please don't take this the wrong way. I'm not trying to make you feel uncomfortable. I just want you to know that you're very special... and the only reason I'm telling you is that I don't know if anyone else ever has."¹⁶⁰ This makes Charlie's thoughts wander to his aunt: "When I was driving home, I just thought about the word "special." And I thought the last person who said that about me was my aunt Helen."¹⁶¹ This illustrates how Charlie tends to think about Helen whenever someone says or does something remotely similar to what she could have said or done. It seems like these incidents triggers his memories, as they make him think of her, although his mind is struggling to place exactly what it is he remembers.

There are several examples from Charlie's letters which indicate that Sam has emotionally replaced the role of Helen. Shortly after meeting Sam, Charlie has a sexual dream about her, which he tells her about, and he writes about their conversation regarding this:

"You know you're too young for me, Charlie? You do know that?" Yes, I do."

"I don't want you to waste your time thinking about me that way." "I won't. It was just a dream." Sam then gave me a hug, and it was strange because my family doesn't hug a lot except my Aunt Helen. But after a few moments, I could smell Sam's perfume, and I could feel her body against me. And I stepped back. "Sam, I'm thinking about you that way."¹⁶²

This passage shows how Charlie's thoughts turn to his aunt in situations where he is intimate with someone. The fact that Sam is older than him, and arguably one of his role models, also indicates that she could remind him of his aunt. That he associates Sam with Helen is also represented in a later letter, where he writes about the Christmas present he has given her:

¹⁶⁰ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 194-195.

¹⁶¹ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 195-196.

¹⁶² Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 24.

Last came Sam. I had been thinking about this present for a long time. I think I thought about this present from the first time I really saw her. Not met her or saw her but the first time I really saw her if you know what I mean. There was a card attached. Inside the card, I told Sam that the present I gave her was given to me by my Aunt Helen. I was an old 45 record that had the Beatles' song "Something." I used to listen to it all the time when I was little and thinking about grown-up things.¹⁶³

This makes it clear that Charlie connects Sam to Helen, and the regifting of Helen's present symbolizes that Sam has replaced her role. His continuous mentions of Helen in relation to Sam thereby contribute to represent how his mind is trying to process his trauma. This is consistent with Balaev's argument that in literature, trauma is known solely through repetitive flashbacks that reenact the event, because it is the only way the mind is able to represent it.¹⁶⁴ Although these are not strictly flashbacks, the reader perceives that his mind wanders to his aunt whenever something happens with Sam, which could be his mind gradually trying to represent the trauma, although he is not yet aware of it.

Celie's trauma mainly represents itself through her gradually more deliberate discourse regarding the people who have mistreated her, namely Albert and Alphonso. Although she writes about her unhappiness, it takes a long time before she is fully aware of how badly the traumatic experiences have affected her. For instance, she writes about a conversation with Sofia, where Sofia tells her that life does not stop just because you leave home, something that makes Celie reflect around her life: "My life stop when I left home, I think. But then I think again. It stop with Mr----- maybe, but start up again with Shug."¹⁶⁵ This indicates that she is aware that she lost her freedom when she married Mr-----, as he beats her and treats her as his maid. However, she concludes that her life has started again, although she still lives with Mr----- who treats her just as badly as before. Thus, it seems like she represses her suffering. This is also visible when she writes about a conversation regarding Shug's new husband:

Mr----- feelings hurt, I say. I don't mention mine. Aw, she say. That old stuff finally over with. You and Albert feel just like family now. Anyhow, once you told me he beat you, and won't work, I felt different about him. If you was my wife, she say, I'd

¹⁶³ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 73.

¹⁶⁴ Balaev, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory", 150-151.

¹⁶⁵ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 77.

cover you up with kisses stead of licks, and work hard for you too. He ain't beat me much since you made him quit, I say. Just a slap now and then when he ain't got nothing else to do.¹⁶⁶

Because Celie and Albert are both in love with Shug, they are unhappy about her new marriage. However, this passage shows that Celie only mentions her husband's feelings and not her own, which again indicates that she undermines her own emotions. This is also evident when they talk about the beating, and Celie makes it seem like "a slap now and then" is tolerable. These examples contribute to represent Celie's trauma, because they show how the trauma has disrupted her thoughts, and that she is struggling to readjust her mind and adapt to her surroundings.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Shug asks Celie about how it was to have intercourse with the father of her children, and this conversation makes Celie emotional because it makes all the memories come back to her. This resonates with Balaev's definition of trauma, which is "a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society."¹⁶⁷ This is the first time someone has asked Celie about this, and this is also the first letter where Celie is able to properly discuss the trauma: "It hurt me, you know, I say. I was just going on fourteen. I never even thought bout men having nothing down there so big. It scare me just to see it. And the way it poke itself and grow."¹⁶⁸ After this, Celie lies in Shug's arms and cries while she explains everything that happened within her family. Although Celie has not repressed the trauma, this still indicates that she has stopped herself from thinking about it, and that everything comes back to her in this moment. This shows how the traumatic experiences have created damage on her consciousness, and that she has not been able to discuss the trauma until this moment, where it almost seems like she is experiencing flashbacks of the traumatic events. It seems like Celie blames herself, and that she feels too ashamed to talk about this. This feeling of shame is also present in a later letter, where she writes to God about the revelation that Nettie is alive, and that she is coming home with Celie's children:

¹⁶⁶ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 101.

¹⁶⁷ Balaev, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory", 150.

¹⁶⁸ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 102.

Now that I know Nettie is alive I begin to strut a little bit. Think, When she come home us leave here. Her and me and our two children. What they look like, I wonder. But it hard to think bout them. I feels shame. More than love, to tell the truth. Anyway, is they all right here? Got good sense at all? Shug say children got by incest turn into dunces. Incest part of the devil's plan.¹⁶⁹

This passage clearly illustrates how Celie is struggling to come to terms with her trauma, and that her shamefulness is overpowering her ability to accept happiness. This in turn gives the perception that she is turning inward and struggling to accept her reality, something that is in line with Balaev's discussion claiming that the protagonist's search for previous truths can be a painful, but transformative, journey.¹⁷⁰

Celie's shamefulness is also comparable to how Charlie feels in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, as also he seems to be blaming himself for things that are not his fault and related to his trauma. Most significantly, Charlie blames himself for the death of his aunt, something that he expresses in several of his letters, especially the ones written around Christmas time. He sympathizes deeply with her, because she also was molested as a child, and he explains how no one in his family wants to talk about it:

Every time it comes to Christmas it's all I can think about... deep down. It is the one thing that makes me deep down sad. I will not say who. I will not say when. I will just say that my aunt Helen was molested. I hate that word. It was done by someone who was very close to her.¹⁷¹

Charlie's discourse regarding this illustrates that it occupies much of his thoughts, which could be his trauma representing itself, although he is not able to realize the actual reason behind this. The trauma has thereby disrupted his consciousness, which makes him blame himself instead of seeing things clearly. This is also in line with Balaev's claim that protagonists of trauma novel often experience self-estrangement because the traumatic experience causes a disruption in their reality.¹⁷² Later in that same letter, Charlie writes about

¹⁶⁹ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 133.

¹⁷⁰ Balaev, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory", 164-164.

¹⁷¹ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 95-96.

¹⁷² Balaev, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory", 162.

his aunt's death. She died in a car accident on her way to buy a birthday present for Charlie, which makes him believe that it was his fault:

Despite everything my mom and doctor and dad have said to me about blame, I can't stop thinking what I know. And 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. I would do anything to make this go away. I miss her terribly. I have to stop writing now because I am too sad.¹⁷³

Not only does this show how his trauma is making Charlie turn inward and struggle with his past, but it also shows how he must stop writing, because thinking about his aunt is too difficult for him. This indicates that his mind is working with recalling his trauma, and that he hinders himself from thinking too much about his aunt, as a defense mechanism.

As discussed, Charlie tends to search for things that remind him of Helen whenever he is feeling bad, which is his trauma representing itself. This is also evident after the fall out with his friends after the game of "truth or dare", where Charlie kisses Sam instead of Mary Elizabeth. As discussed in the second chapter, he is encouraged to stay away from his friends after this, and he is desperately seeking to fix the situation without much luck. Interestingly, he starts writing about his aunt Helen again, and that he has been visiting her grave. This makes his mind wander:

So, I went to visit my aunt Helen, and for the first time in my life, it didn't help. (...) I know that I brought this all on myself. I know that I deserve this. I'd do anything to not be this way. I'd do anything to make it up to everyone. And to not have seen a psychiatrist, who explains to me about being "passive aggressive". And to not have to take the medicine he gives me, which is too expensive for my dad. And to not have to talk about memories with him. Or be nostalgic about bad things.¹⁷⁴

This passage does not only illustrate his fixation on Helen and his tendency to blame himself for things, but it also reveals that his psychiatrist is aware of these things. That Charlie writes that he would do anything to not have to talk about memories with him, once again shows how he is avoiding his trauma, and constantly tries to numb his thoughts. Also, the fact that he

¹⁷³ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 98.

¹⁷⁴ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 148-149.

acknowledges that he is nostalgic about bad thing indicates that he knows that something is wrong, but that his mind is hindering him from exploring the truth. At the end of this letter, Charlie reveals that he has been smoking a lot of pot, because he does not know what else to do.¹⁷⁵ This further proves how he is trying to numb himself, as an attempt to shut out his emotions. This is also coherent with Balaev's argument that the traumatized protagonists' search for previous truths can be painful, which leads them to rather turn inward and thereby struggle increasingly with coming to terms with their past.¹⁷⁶

In Celie's case, her trauma is represented through her ability to find strength in the face of adversity, something that is visible when she decides to visit and confront her father after many years of avoidance. As mentioned earlier, Nettie reveals in a letter that Alphonso is not their real father. After having processed the information, Celie writes to Nettie: "For the first time in my life I wanted to see Pa."¹⁷⁷ She has not visited him since she moved out, and the fact that she has now gained enough strength to confront him shows how she is finally able to face her past, and thereby her trauma, and move on with her life. When she and Shug meet him, he does not seem to recognize her at first. They all have a conversation, which Celie writes about:

This Daisy, he say. My new wife. Why, say Shug, you don't look more than fifteen. I ain't, say Daisy. I'm surprise your people let you marry. She shrug, look at pa. They work for him, she say. Live on his land. I'm her people now, he say. I feels so sick I almost gag. Nettie in Africa, I say. A missionary. She wrote me that you ain't our real Pa. Well, he say. So now you know.¹⁷⁸

Although Celie does not receive any apology or explanation from Alphonso, this meeting still seems to give her a form of closure, as he confirms that he is not her real father as well as he proves what a terrible person he still is. In her next letter to Nettie, she explains why she no longer writes to God, and writes about her and Shug's conversation concerning this. There, she explains how she has been so busy thinking about God that she has been ignoring everything surrounding her:

¹⁷⁵ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 149.

¹⁷⁶ Balaev, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory", 164-164.

¹⁷⁷ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 161.

¹⁷⁸ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 164.

Well, us talk and talk bout God, but I'm still adrift. Trying to chase that old white man out of my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?). Not the little wildflowers. Nothing. Now that my eyes opening, I feels like a fool. Next to any little scrub of a bush in my yard, Mr-----'s evil sort of shrink. But not altogether. Still, it is like Shug say, You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a'tall.¹⁷⁹

This illustrates how Celie has responded to her trauma by turning inward and ignoring her surroundings, but that she is finally becoming aware of the external world now that she has faced Alphonso (and decided to leave Albert). That she is now able to see the beauty in things and depict her surroundings shows that she is no longer letting her trauma define or control her, and that it is no longer disrupting her consciousness.

As discussed, Balaev points to different scholars who all draw connections between trauma and memory, and claim that in literature, trauma is known solely through repetitive flashbacks that reenact the event.¹⁸⁰ This is transferable to what happens to Charlie, as he finally recalls the trauma after an experience with Sam that leads him to having flashbacks of the molestation. After she has confronted him before leaving for college, they start kissing, and the situation escalates. Charlie is enjoying himself until something happens:

And we touched each other from the waist up over our clothes. And it was so beautiful. She was so beautiful. She took my hand and slid it under her pants. And I touched her. And I just couldn't believe it. It was like everything made sense. Until she moved her hand under my pants, and she touched me. That's when I stopped her. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Did that hurt?" I shook my head. It felt good actually. I didn't know what was wrong.¹⁸¹

He continues to explain how he felt like he wanted to die, and that he started to cry "really hard" until he finally fell asleep and had a dream: "My brother and my sister and I were watching television with my aunt Helen. Everything was in slow motion. The sound was

¹⁷⁹ Walker, *The Color Purple*, 177.

¹⁸⁰ Balaev, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory", 150-151.

¹⁸¹ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 217.

thick. And she was doing what Sam was doing.”¹⁸² As he continues writing this letter, he is explaining how he does not know what is wrong with him, and that all he can do is “keep writing this gibberish to keep from breaking apart”¹⁸³. He writes that there is no one he can talk to, not even his aunt Helen: “But she’s gone. And even if she were here, I don’t think I could talk to her either. Because I’m starting to feel like what I dreamt about her last night was true. And my psychiatrist questions weren’t weird after all.”¹⁸⁴ Although he is still struggling to fully understand what it is that he has remembered, he has at least realized that Helen did something bad, and that there is a reason for the way he has been feeling. In the epilogue, Charlie writes that he has been in the hospital for the last two months, which have made him reflect on his situation:

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 very important to know. It made things feel clear and together. Don’t get me wrong. I know what happened was important. And I needed to remember it. (...) So, I guess we are who we are for a lot of reasons. And maybe we’ll never know most of them. But even if we don’t have the power to choose where we come from, we can still choose where we go from there.¹⁸⁵

Here, it not only becomes clear that Charlie has remembered the molestation, but it also becomes clear that he is finally able to see things clearly. In other words, his discourse here indicates that his mind is no longer disrupted, and that his trauma is starting to heal. This is in line with Hartman’s discussion, as he claims that trauma is a result of an experience that has not fully passed into the victim’s consciousness.¹⁸⁶ It is also comparable to *The Color Purple*, as both Celie and Charlie seem to experience this new awareness in life after they have come to terms with their trauma.

¹⁸² Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 218.

¹⁸³ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 220.

¹⁸⁴ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 220.

¹⁸⁵ Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 228.

¹⁸⁶ Hartman, “Trauma Within the Limits of Literature”, 257.

4.3. Chapter conclusion

As this discussion has shown, both Celie in *The Color Purple* and Charlie in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* have experienced trauma, which is represented in both different and similar ways, and which echoes with the mentioned literary trauma theories. Both characters' trauma is represented through their disrupted consciousness, their inability to properly adapt to their circumstances, and through what can be interpreted as flashbacks of the traumatic experiences. It is also represented through their growing awareness and ability to express themselves which happens in line with their capability to come to terms with their trauma. However, the actual experiences that have led to their trauma are very different. It never becomes clear exactly what happened to Charlie. All we know is that he was molested by his aunt as a child, and that he recalls the memories of this when Sam touches him in a similar way that she used to do. Celie, on the other hand, has been brutally raped and impregnated by her stepfather, and she is still experiencing abuse by her violent husband. Both characters still have in common that they experience personal development, and their ability to take control of their own lives and overpower their trauma increases strongly from the first to the last letter. This is consistent with Hartman's argument that there is a connection between writing about trauma and personal development.¹⁸⁷ However, as the overall purpose of this thesis is to emphasize the significance that the epistolary form has on the perception of their increasing self-realization, it seems necessary to discuss how this also connects with the representations of trauma. As mentioned, Davis and Meretoja argue that literature is an important forum for discussing trauma related issues.¹⁸⁸ Similarly, Hartman emphasizes the connection between words and wounds, and argues that wounds can be healed by further words.¹⁸⁹ In other words, scholars agree that putting words on one's emotions can have a therapeutic effect on the traumatized protagonist. As I have discussed throughout this thesis, letter-writing can also have a therapeutic effect, whether this happens subconsciously as one writes or if one more deliberately decides to write letters as an attempt to heal psychologically. As mentioned in the discussion of the epistolary form, Joe Bray argues that the epistolary form plays an important role when it comes to representing individual psychology.¹⁹⁰ As trauma undoubtedly interrelates with individual psychology, it is safe to say that the epistolary form also plays an important role when it comes to representing trauma.

¹⁸⁷ Hartman, "Trauma Within the Limits of Literature", 259.

¹⁸⁸ Davis and Meretoja, "Introduction to Literary Trauma Studies", 1.

¹⁸⁹ Hartman, "Trauma Within the Limits of Literature", 259.

¹⁹⁰ Bray, *The Epistolary Novel*, 2.

As my previous discussion has explored, the five significant characteristics of the epistolary form all contribute to enhance the perception that the narrators experience increasing self-realization, which in turn proves that the genre itself is of importance for the perception of their identity formation. It is the narrators' discourses that have this effect on the reader, as their subjective, but deeply honest, writings about the events in their lives give the reader a sense of what it is like to be them, which thereby makes it easier to understand how they are feeling and how their thoughts are developing. This connects to the representations of trauma as well, as it is precisely through the letter-writers' discourses one can see how their trauma unfolds. This is not to say that representations of trauma are not visible in other genres, but because these works are fictional, the letterform has a special function in letting the reader in on the narrators' innermost thought and feelings as the letters are supposed to be written by the fictional characters. It also lets the reader view how their discourses regarding the traumatic experience change gradually, and how their consciousness change. This shift in consciousness is also connected to increasing self-realization, which again is connected to the form itself. The next part of my discussion will revolve around the well-known movie adaptations of the two novels, where I will investigate the significance of the epistolary form even further by exploring what gets lost when the letter perspective disappears.

Chapter 5: The film adaptations

Chapter introduction

While analyzing both *The Color Purple* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, it seems inevitable to also discuss the movie adaptations of both novels. Both movies have received acclaim from critics, and many are probably more familiar with these than with the novels. *The Color Purple* movie was directed by Steven Spielberg and released in 1985, only three years after the novel. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* movie was released in 2012, thirteen years after the novel, and directed by Stephen Chbosky himself. Due to the purpose of this thesis, as well as space limitations, I will not go in depth on this topic, but it still seems necessary to discuss some relevant adaptation theory and the contrast between literature and film. This will hopefully contribute to emphasize the importance of the epistolary form even further, as it can highlight what gets lost in the adaptations, and thereby what gets lost as soon as the letter perspective disappears. If one is familiar with both the novels and the adaptations, one is probably also aware of how different the movies are to the novels, especially due to the transformation from reading letters to viewing an actual plot unfold. Both films do include some of the letters from the novels, as the actors playing Charlie and Celie occasionally read a letter aloud, as a voiceover that supplements the ongoing action on the screen. However, the movies mainly consist of spoken dialogue between the different characters.

In the specific 2017 edition of *The Color Purple* that I possess, there is added an introduction written by Alice Walker in 2007. There, she writes that she has recently watched the movie again many years after its release, and that what stood out for her was how different it is from the book. She brings up several examples from the novel and argues that it must be difficult for viewers unacquainted with the book to understand certain things, for instance that the man who raped Celie is not her father, but her stepfather.¹⁹¹ She concludes her recent cinema experience like this: “But I was reminded again of something I had held fast to years ago on the set in Hollywood as we were creating the film of *The Color Purple*: Thank the Goddess there is a book.”¹⁹² Regarding *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Chbosky directed the movie himself. Although the most significant events of the novel are included in the movie, Charlie’s private thoughts disappear, as the letters are transformed into dialogue. In a 2012 interview with Chbosky in *National Post*, he says that there was never any doubt that he

¹⁹¹ Walker, *The Color Purple*, xiii-xiv.

¹⁹² Walker, *The Color Purple*, xv.

would be the one directing the movie, but explains why it took so many years:

I knew I couldn't just try to film the book - that's not doing the book or the movie justice. I needed the time to be able to let go of certain sequences, let go of certain favourite scenes in the book that I knew wouldn't service the movie. But, also, I needed to get better at writing movies.¹⁹³

This shows how it was a complicated process to transform the novel into film, as many considerations needed to be done. Because certain aspects of the novels are changed or deleted from both movies, someone familiar with the originals will view the adaptations differently than someone who has only watched the movies. Therefore, it is necessary to include some adaptation theory in order to properly discuss the films and what it is that disappears in the filmizations.

5.1. Adaptation theory

In the book *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon argues that anyone who has ever experienced an adaptation has a theory of adaptation, whether this is conscious or not.¹⁹⁴ She further argues that adaptation theory has tended to value the so-called “source” text over the adaptation, and her book works as an attempt to challenge this view.¹⁹⁵ Furthermore, she discusses how anyone who knows the adapted work will constantly be drawing comparisons between it and the new adaptation, but that someone who does not know the original will not view the new work as an adaptation.¹⁹⁶ Regarding exactly what it is that gets adapted, she argues that themes and characters are among the story elements that are easiest to adapt across media. For example, she explains how many have argued that H.C. Andersen's stories have been adapted into many romantic ballets, simply because of the stories' easily accessible themes such as “innocence versus evil”. She further explains how characters can easily be

¹⁹³ Mark Medley, “Stephen Chbosky on filming *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*: “I needed to get better at writing movies.” *National Post* (Toronto), September 28, 2012, <https://nationalpost.com/entertainment/stephen-chbosky-on-filming-the-perks-of-being-a-wallflower-i-needed-to-get-better-at-writing-movies>.

¹⁹⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation 2nd ed.* (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), xiii, ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁹⁵ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, xv.

¹⁹⁶ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, xvii.

transported from one text to another, and that the psychological development of the character often is the focus of adaptation.¹⁹⁷

Hutcheon further argues that most people probably think of adaptations of novels when discussing the move from page to screen. Dramatizations of novels, she argues, have become normal because they contain much information which can relatively quickly be translated into performance¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, she argues that the epistolary novel likely is the most difficult genre to dramatize, because of the required changes.¹⁹⁹ She gives several examples of adapted epistolary novels, for example *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782) by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, and explains how the many adaptations of this novel have all had a different take on how to change the letterform into spoken dialogue, something that often changes the focus of the story. However, she argues that the large number of adaptations of this novel indicate that the formal difficulties in adapting an epistolary novel must be viewed as challenges rather than disincentives for the ones adapting them. As both *The Color Purple* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* have been adapted, the novels' form does not seem to be problematic for this process. However, it is precisely this transformation into spoken dialogue that changes their focus, as the focus is no longer on interpreting the narrators' letters but on interpreting the many interactions between the different characters, as well as the different themes of the stories.

Regarding the audience of adaptations, Hutcheon argues that someone who views an adaptation while knowing the original will in the process fill in any gaps with information from the original. She further claims that sometimes, the adapters rely too much on the audience's ability to fill in these gaps, and that an adaptation is only successful if it makes sense for audiences who are both familiar and unfamiliar with the adapted work.²⁰⁰ Furthermore, she argues that someone who knows and appreciates the original too well will be harder to impress with the adaptation than someone who does not have this foreknowledge, and that the latter group will likely greet the film as a new work, and not as an adaptation at all.²⁰¹ Regarding epistolary novels, the audience who is familiar with the original will arguably be even harder to impress with an adaptation, as the transformation of letters into spoken dialogue makes the adaptation significantly different from the original. Because the letters from the novels are missing, the audience will probably be filling in information from

¹⁹⁷ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 10-11.

¹⁹⁸ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 39

¹⁹⁹ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 40.

²⁰⁰ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 120-121.

²⁰¹ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 121.

these when watching the movies, and thereby constantly compare the two, something that arguably will affect how the movies are received.

5.2. Comparison of a selection of film reviews and the scholarship on the novels

With Hutcheon's discussion of adaptation theory in mind, it seems necessary to also include some reviews of both movies. These will hopefully contribute to enhance what it is about the movies that stand out to the general viewer. This will enable me to compare how this is different from the existing scholarship on the novels which I have discussed in the preceding chapters. Moreover, it will contribute to show how the reader's perception of the characters is strongly connected to the characteristics of the epistolary form, as my previous discussion have shown.

In his review of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Michael Smith argues that the movie shows the process of moving from adolescence to adulthood and emphasizes its ability to make the viewer relate to the many lifechanging moments in the teenagers' lives. However, he underlines that the movie is not just fun and entertaining, as it deals with issues of mental health, suicide, homosexuality, and other teen experiences. He also argues that Chbosky's epistolary novel "creates some challenges for his screenplay that will leave some viewers confused about the framework"²⁰², such as Charlie's confessional letters to a stranger. Similarly, in her review of the movie, Alexandra Heeney mostly writes about how it depicts Charlie's turbulent first year of high school and argues that it "constantly forces us to question our initial conception of Charlie", which is that he is the "archetype of the loner"²⁰³. Furthermore, she argues that the movie portrays some cliché motifs, but she concludes that it does more than telling a story about the archetypal wallflower trying to accept not being cool: "It's a film about very real and complicated characters who discover each other's complexities and help each other deal with very difficult situations."²⁰⁴ Thus, both reviewers emphasize the "coming-of-age" aspect of the film, but conclude that it does a good job in portraying important, difficult issues.

Katherine Monk seems to be more critical to the movie in her review. Like Smith and Heeney, she writes that it is a relatable coming-of-age story about a teenager who is trying to

²⁰² Michael Smith, "Review: 'The Perks of Being a Wallflower'." *McClatchy - Tribune Business News*, October 12, 2012, <https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/review-perks-being-wallflower/docview/1095837172/se-2>.

²⁰³ Alexandra Heeney, "Review: 'The Perks of being a Wallflower'." *University Wire*, June 20, 2018, <https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/review-perks-being-wallflower/docview/2057392262/se-2>.

²⁰⁴ Heeney, "Review: 'The Perks of Being a Wallflower'".

make his way through the obstacles he meets. However, she claims that Chbosky's movie feels stuck: "It nods back to a moment of recreation without recreating it. In other words, it's the same old coming-of-age story without any new edges. The nerd is redeemed. The gay kid comes out. The cute girl gets kissed."²⁰⁵ She claims that Logan Lerman, who plays Charlie, is steady in the lead, but that he does not really say that much "outside of the somewhat predictable voice-over in predictable moments" where he "manages to convey the core emotional truth of the drama."²⁰⁶ In other words, Monk finds that the voice-over of the letters is the only aspect of the movie where Charlie's true emotions are expressed. In the article "The Perks of Being Relational: Reviewing *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*", Colton Brown and Tonya R. Hammer discuss how the movie is about Charlie, Sam and Patrick attempting to survive high school as well as finding themselves, and argue that they not only survive, but flourish, because of their relationships with each other. They further claim that the film addresses many challenges people face when growing up today, and that it can help people with tackling similar challenges.²⁰⁷ The reviewers have in common that they emphasize the adolescence nature of the film, and although some find it somewhat cliché, most of them acknowledge how it can help adolescents who are struggling with similar issues as the characters.

Regarding *The Color Purple*, Owen McNally claims that "it was the best of times and the worst of times for Alice Walker as "The Color Purple" was transformed in 1985 from a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel to a Steven Spielberg-silver-screen spectacle."²⁰⁸ He discusses how critics have accused the movie of softening or blurring certain aspects of the novel, especially the lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug. He argues that the novel is formed by the transformative power of the love between the two, something that Spielberg has toned down in his movie adaptation. In another review, Vincent Canby writes that while watching the movie at the cinema, the audience was audible in its pleasure, and that the movie seems to be a crowd-pleaser. Furthermore, he argues that Spielberg is known for making movies that carry clout, and that Walker's novel is "a grim, rudely funny, black-feminist family chronicle" which is bound to gain attention when transformed into film. Moreover, he discusses how

²⁰⁵ Katherine Monk, "Review: The Perks of being a Wallflower." *Postmedia News*, October 05, 2012, <https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/review-perks-being-wallflower/docview/1092838112/se-2>.

²⁰⁶ Monk, "Review: 'The Perks of Being a Wallflower'".

²⁰⁷ Colton Brown and Tonya R. Hammer, "The Perks of Being Relational: Reviewing *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*." *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*. 10, no. 2 (2015): 258-261, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2015.1033506>.

²⁰⁸ Owen McNally, "'Color Purple' film experience altered life of Alice Walker." *Hartford Courant*, January 21, 1996. <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/color-purple-film-experience-altered-life-alice/docview/255626069/se-2>.

Spielberg has called the book “a very strong emotional read” and argues that the book is not just a “read”, but a “tour de force”, but that the Spielberg movie is more equivalent to a “read”.²⁰⁹ Although he seems to find the movie enjoyable, according to him, the film clearly does not do the book justice.

Similarly, Janet Maslin argues that some of the signal qualities of Walker’s story are not present in the Spielberg movie, and that “even the most brutal events are set forth in a storybook style.”²¹⁰ For instance, she writes about the scene where Celie and Nettie are forcibly separated, which she believes should be the movie’s most wrenching episode, but argues that the music overpowers the impact of the scene, and that this happens throughout the movie. Moreover, she argues that this broad simplification of the novel’s themes suggests caricature, but that the actors at least rise above their roles. Patricia McElroy argues that the film adaptation of *The Color Purple* can be “useful in teaching sex roles, sexism, and gender identity, with an emphasis on the minority experience.”²¹¹ Furthermore, she discusses how both the novel and film have received much criticism, and that both evoke strong reactions. However, she argues that the character development and conflict resolutions in the film is significantly different from the novel. She claims that one cannot understand Walker’s imagery from viewing the film alone and suggests that if one should use the film as a teaching tool, one must do this in combination with the novel.²¹² Thus, all the mentioned reviewers seem to agree that the impressionable themes and qualities of the novel are toned down in the film, and that one cannot understand certain important aspects of the novel by only watching the film.

While I will not go into detail on the films or discuss specific scenes, I will here briefly discuss how the epistolary form is of importance for how the character’s development gets interpreted by the audience. As these reviews demonstrate there is a quite grave difference between the audience’s perception of the films and the audience’s perception of the novels. With Hutcheon’s discussion in mind, it is not surprising that the viewers who are familiar with the novels are difficult to impress, as they typically will be drawing comparisons to the novels. As Hutcheon claims, the fact that the novels are epistolary can also make the

²⁰⁹ Vincent Canby, “Film review: From a palette of cliches comes ‘The Color Purple.’” *New York Times*, January 05, 1986, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/film-view-palette-cliches-comes-color-purple/docview/425760578/se-2>.

²¹⁰ Janet Maslin, “Film: ‘The Color Purple’, from Steven Spielberg.” *New York Times*, December 18, 1985, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/film-color-purple-steven-spielberg/docview/425726318/se-2>.

²¹¹ Patricia McElroy, Review of *The Color Purple*. *Teaching Sociology* 17, no. 1 (1989): 131, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1317971>.

²¹² McElroy, “Review of *The Color Purple*”, 132.

adaptation process especially challenging, as the letters are turned into spoken dialogue. Interestingly, the aspects about the films that seem to stand out the most to the viewers, both positively and negatively, seem to be connected to either the absence or presence of the letter perspective. Regarding the film reviews of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, they are not that different from the discussed scholarship on the novel, where the scholars seem to agree that it is a coming-of-age novel that brings up important themes connected to adolescence and mental health. However, these scholars also agree that Charlie experiences personal growth and increasing self-reflexivity, which is visible through the development of his letters. As Monk argues in her review, the film is a typical coming-of-age story without any edges, and the emotional truth behind the drama is only revealed in the few voiceovers where the actor of Charlie reads some of the letters aloud. This indicates that it is precisely through reading Charlie's discourse in his letters one can interpret his personal development and increasing self-realization, and that the perception of this is weakened as soon as the letter perspective almost disappears.

The film reviewers of *The Color Purple* seem to agree that the film tones down some important themes and issues in the novel. Although the film seems to be a "crowd pleaser" for some, the reviews of the movie are generally quite negative. As discussed earlier, much of the scholarship on the novel focus on its important themes such as feminism, religion, and oppression. Moreover, it also emphasizes Celie's extreme character development, and her transformation from a passive victim to an independent woman. Several of the scholars also underline the importance of the epistolary form and agree that Celie's letters allow her to shape her own narrative as well as they let the reader explore her subjectiveness and development. As several of the film reviewers indicate, it is impossible to understand Walker's depictions of Celie by only watching the movie, as it is significantly different to the novel, as well as several of the most touching events in the novel are simplified and changed in order to meet most audiences. However, it is evident that without the letter perspective, neither of the films are able to portray the narrators' identity formation and increasing self-realization in a sufficient way. This is not surprising, as the focus changes from interpreting the letter writers' subjective thoughts to interpreting the spoken dialogue between the different characters in the movies. The reason why this is relevant to discuss, is that it contributes to enhance the significant effects that the characteristics of the epistolary form have on the reader's perception of the narrators' increasing self-realization.

As mentioned throughout this thesis, the five characteristics of the epistolary form that I have selected as the most significant, are as follows:

1. *The presence of absence*
2. *The existence of an addressee*
3. *The narrator's credibility or pathos*
4. *The narrator's suffering and isolation*
5. *The exploration of the individual's subjectivity*

The reason why I list these again, is that they clearly demonstrate what is missing in the films, or at least what is difficult to portray in the films. I will discuss each of these characteristics in relevance to the movies, in order demonstrate how they affect the perception of the narrators.

In epistolary novels, absence is, as discussed, a narrative force, as the absence between the letter writer and the addressee is what drives the narrator to write letters. The presence of absence can also present itself in an abstract manner, as a psychological absence. This could be that the narrator lacks something like love or friendship and tries to satisfy these needs by writing. Because the letter perspective is, except from a few letters, replaced by spoken dialogue in the films, it is less clear that the narrators are writing letters due to the presence of absence in either way. Although Celie and Nettie are separated in the film version of *The Color Purple*, and this absence is affecting Celie deeply, the movie is not driven by this absence in the same way the novel is. In the film version of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie is lacking friends and love, but the movie mostly centers around the friendships he builds with Sam and Patrick, instead of exploring his personal emotions regarding this. Thus, there is a presence of absence in both films, but this does not drive the action or dialogue like in the novels. Regarding the existence of an addressee, this characteristic of the epistolary form is present in both films, as some letters are read aloud as a voice-over to the action on the screen. However, as mentioned, this only happens occasionally in both films, and it is not a central aspect of the films as the letters are mostly replaced by spoken dialogue, and the addressees are thereby not given any specific attention.

According to the reviews, the narrator's credibility and pathos seems to be present to a certain degree, as several of the reviewers of both films point out that the different actors' performances are amongst the few good things about them. Yet, although their portrayals of either Charlie or Celie seem believable, it is difficult to measure the characters' credibility or pathos, as it is no longer their discourses that are up for interpretation, but the plot of the movies. The same goes for the narrator's suffering and isolation. In both movies, it is evident that the main characters are suffering and feeling isolated, in different ways. However, as

several of the reviewers point out, especially regarding *The Color Purple*, some events that are very touching and impressionable in the novel are toned down or simplified in the film. Still, regarding the characteristics of the epistolary form, the one regarding the protagonists' suffering and isolation is arguably the one that is most visible in the film adaptations as well, probably because this also is the easiest aspect to transform into another format compared to the other characteristics that are strongly connected to the narrators' letters specifically.

The final characteristic regarding the exploration of the individual's subjectivity is, arguably, the most difficult one to transform into film. This is because the narrators of the letters write about their feelings and emotions regarding the events in their life, something that disappears in line with the disappearance of the letters. This also affects the perception of the narrators' increasing self-realization, as it is precisely their personal, subjective discourses that shows how their thoughts and emotions develop from start to end. Watching the films gives the viewer a certain idea of how the characters feel, but it does not provide any information about how their actual thoughts develop, compared to reading their letters.

The purpose of this chapter was to emphasize the importance of the epistolary form even further, by highlighting what gets lost in the film adaptations of the main works, and thereby what gets lost as soon as the letter perspective disappears. To conclude, we see that in both films, several important aspects of the novels either disappear or are simplified, which is a result of the shift in focus from interpreting letters to interpreting spoken dialogue. Compared to the scholarship on both novels, and my own discussion of them, the film reviews seem to emphasize the same major themes and events, but they do not focus on the narrators' major character development. As discussed, this seems to be a result of the removal of the letter perspective, as it is the epistolary form, or the narrators' discourse through their letters, that enhances the perception of their increasing self-realization and identity formation. Furthermore, the film reviews of *The Color Purple* are slightly more negative than the film reviews of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, as the differences between the novel and the film seem to be more significant. This could be because Chbosky directed his own movie, and thereby could be more qualified to successfully transform the novel into performance. However, this is only speculation, and the most important thoughts to take away from this discussion is that the characteristics of the epistolary form clearly play an important role in the perception of the main characters' increasing self-realization, as the characters' development is not emphasized, and often not even mentioned, in the film reviews. This is also in line with Hutcheon's argument that the epistolary novel is the most difficult genre to dramatize, as the adaptation often changes the focus of the story.

Conclusion

The epistolary novel has existed for centuries, and many believe that it reached its peak in the eighteenth century and that its style is unsophisticated and outdated. Since then, the genre's popularity has declined, and there also seems to be a lack on scholarship on the form itself. This could, naturally, be a result of fewer epistolary works being written and published these days. However, since the twentieth century, a renewed interest in the form appears to have arisen, which several scholars argue is due to its ability to let the reader into the narrator's innermost thoughts and feelings.²¹³ Several also argue that its concern with consciousness lets the reader connect with the characters in a special way, because reading their private letters which are meant for someone else offers a unique exploration of the individual's subjectivity, as well as it makes the narrator come across as credible and honest.²¹⁴ There is also an agreement between scholars that the letter-writers often suffer and feel isolated, and that this is what drives them to write the letters. Also, several emphasize that absence works as a narrative force in epistolary novels, either because the narrator is physically separated from the addressee, or because there exists a psychological absence in their lives, for instance the absence of love, friendship or happiness, which drives the narrator to write about his or her feelings. Thus, all these factors make the epistolary novel well-suited for exploring individual psychology.

The purpose of this thesis has been to discuss the two epistolary novels *The Color Purple* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* in light of how their protagonists experience personal growth and an increase in their self-realization, and how the perception of this is closely connected to the characteristics of the epistolary form. As we have seen, the genre's characteristics contribute to a unique exploration of their psychology, as they contribute to let the reader into their subjective thoughts. Although my analysis of important themes, characters, and symbols in the two novels have illustrated that both Celie and Charlie experience a major character development, it is my discussion of their private discourses in their letters that more explicitly have shown these developments. As we have seen, their discourses change quite significantly from their first to last letter, something that is in line with the development of their self-realization and self-reflexivity. Their ability to express themselves more deliberately, especially regarding their past or ongoing trauma, increases in line with their changing sense of self and worldview. Also, because both Celie and Charlie,

²¹³ Khabibova, "The Historical Influence of the Epistolary Novel"; Altman, *Epistolarity*.

²¹⁴ Bray, *The Epistolary Novel*; Kauffman, *Special Delivery*.

although subconsciously, write letters as an attempt to heal their wounds and thereby become more able to face their realities, the letter-writing itself seems to have a therapeutic effect on both. Although the novels are very different, both protagonists stop writing letters when their suffering and isolation have been improved, which shows that they no longer feel the same need to write because the factors that made them write in the first place are no longer as present. At the end of both novels, although in different ways, both characters express that they are finally able to see things clearly. For both novels, the perception of the narrators' increasing self-realization is especially connected to their open and honest discourses about the events in their lives, because this lets the reader explore their subjective thoughts, as well as seeing how their thought processes regarding these events change throughout the novels. For example, as Charlie continues writing, he finally becomes able to recall his repressed childhood trauma, and after this, he is able to reflect on his situation in a much more deliberate manner. In Celie's case, her ability to stand up for herself and actively take control of her own life increases in line with her ability to express herself. Her literacy skills are very poor at the novels start, and her grammar and syntax improve significantly from start to end. So does her ability to articulate her emotions more deliberately, which happens in line with her transformation from being a passive victim to an active agent. These observations are all connected to the characteristics of the letter itself, and thereby to the characteristics of the epistolary novel.

As my discussion has shown, the representations of trauma in both novels are also strongly connected to the form itself. Both Celie's and Charlie's trauma represents itself through their inability to come to terms with their reality, as their traumatic experiences creates a disruption in their consciousness. This is clearer in Charlie's case, as he cannot remember the trauma, but also transferable to Celie as her disturbing reality affects her ability to appreciate her surroundings and accept her happiness. However, their ability to take control of their own lives and overpower their trauma increases in line with their personal development. The letterform's concern with consciousness and individual psychology connects to the trauma representations, as it is through the narrators' discourses that we can see how their trauma unfolds, and how their ability to tackle their problems changes gradually.

The final chapter regarding the film adaptations has contributed to make clear the importance of the epistolary form even further, as the (almost) disappearance of the letter-perspective in the movies changes the focus of the stories. As we have seen, when the letters are replaced with spoken dialogue, the film viewers seem to emphasize the important themes

of the stories, but not the major character developments of the protagonists, which is what most scholars emphasize when writing about the novels. This further shows that the epistolary form and its characteristics affects the perception of the narrators' personal development, because it lets the reader explore the individual's psychology in a unique way.

As mentioned, a renewed interest in the epistolary form seems to have arisen, which scholars suggest is due to its ability to let the reader into the letter writer's innermost thoughts and feelings. This raises the question of why there is newfound interest in the genre, and whether it is something about our contemporary that makes it more appealing now. The form peaked in the eighteenth century, at a time where people frequently wrote letters, as this was the only way to communicate with geographically distant people. The fact that letter-writing was common at the time may contribute to explain the form's popularity, as people could relate to penning down their thoughts and emotions to someone. In our modern society, written communication is mostly performed on technological platforms, something that naturally has replaced the physical letter. This could help explain the decrease in published epistolary novels, as well as its decreasing popularity, as writing letters is no longer a common practice. So, what it is in our contemporary that contributes to this renewed interest in the epistolary? My belief is that there is a connection between this and the ever-increasing interest in individual psychology, as the epistolary form lets the reader explore precisely this through the private letters, whether this is the author's or the fictional character's psychology. Also, in the advent of electronic communication, epistolary fiction can include other sorts of documents than letters, such as emails, text messages and posts on different social media or websites, as long as these fit within the genres criteria. Example of such works are *When You Read This* (2019) by Mary Adkins and *Read Bottom Up: A Novel* (2015) by Neel Shah and Skye Chatham. Both novels are told through series of e-mails, text messages, or other online posts. Other genres which share similar traits as the epistolary novel are also increasing in popularity, such as the autofiction genre, which according to *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* is "a kind of novel or story that is written as a first-person narrative and that commonly presents itself fictionally as an autobiography of the narrator or as an episode within such an autobiographical account."²¹⁵ In other words, the genre combines fiction and memoir. It does not seem coincidental that these genres, that portray stories in somewhat unconventional ways, are simultaneously receiving increased attention. Also, in our hectic

²¹⁵ Chris Baldick, "autofiction", in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 2008, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199208272.001.0001/acref-9780199208272-e-1234?rskey=dE6MdT&result=109>.

and digitalized society, there appears to be a tendency among people, especially those part of the younger generations, to not read longer works anymore. As a soon-to-be teacher, I have noticed that youths often lack the interest or patience to read, especially if it is longer books that are not possible to read online. Because newer epistolary works, as those mentioned above, often narrate stories through series of short, easily readable documents, reading them do not require as much effort and attention from the reader. Therefore, epistolary novels may be well-suited for younger people. This, combined with these genres' ability to let the authors write honestly and personally, are probably among the reasons for this newfound interest in them, and something that could be worth studying further.

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