



Knowledgeable Research (KR)

ISSN: 2583-6633 | CODEN: KRABAU

International Open-Access Peer-Reviewed Refereed Multidisciplinary Journal

<https://knowledgeableresearch.com>

Spl. 01, Issue 04, July, 2026

Received: 11/06/2026 | Accepted: 23/06/2026 | Published: 31/07/2026

Exploring Trauma in The Perks of Being a Wallflower and Normal People: A Comparative Study

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Abstract:

The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky and Normal People by Sally Rooney contain some of the most intricate explorations of psychological trauma and emotional healing in recent literary fiction. Both authors explore how unresolved emotional pain impacts the formation of one's sense of self, relations with others, and self-perception. In this paper, the issue of trauma is explored in terms of how it is represented in the two novels through the examples of the characters of Charlie, Marianne, and Connell, paying particular attention to the role of memory, repression, emotional vulnerability, and healing. With the use of trauma theory as well as the theories of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Bessel van der Kolk, the paper demonstrates the destructive impact that trauma can have on one's identity and communication skills. At the same time, the paper shows that trauma highlights the importance of empathy, therapy, and human connections during emotional healing. The paper will further explore the social aspects of trauma as reflected in novels, such as issues of gender, class, and mental health.

Keywords: Trauma Studies, Psychological Trauma, Emotional Healing, Identity, Memory, Recovery, Contemporary Fiction.

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INTRODUCTION:

Trauma studies emerged as an interdisciplinary field that examines the psychological, emotional, and social consequences of traumatic experiences. Scholars within the field analyses how trauma affects memory, identity,

language, and interpersonal relationships. Trauma often resists direct narration because painful experiences remain fragmented within the mind, making articulation difficult for survivors. Cathy Caruth explains that trauma

originates from an overwhelming experience that cannot be fully processed at the moment of occurrence, returning later through memory, repetition, and emotional disturbance. Trauma, therefore, becomes not merely an event but a psychological condition that continues to shape the survivor's life.

Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*, argues that healing requires survivors to acknowledge traumatic experiences and reconstruct their personal narratives through remembrance and connection. Similarly, Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* demonstrates how trauma affects both the mind and body, influencing behaviour, emotional responses, and interpersonal interactions. Contemporary literature frequently explores these psychological realities, offering readers insight into the emotional complexities of trauma and recovery.

Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and Sally Rooney's *Normal People* are significant contemporary novels that examine the long-term effects of emotional trauma on young individuals. Chbosky portrays the emotional suffering of Charlie, an adolescent struggling with repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse, social anxiety, and emotional isolation. Rooney's *Normal People*

presents Marianne and Connell as emotionally vulnerable individuals whose experiences of abuse, grief, insecurity, and social pressure shape their identities and relationships.

Although the novels differ in narrative style and cultural setting, both texts reveal how trauma influences memory, emotional communication, and human connection. The protagonists struggle with loneliness, self-worth, and vulnerability as they seek emotional stability through interpersonal relationships. The novels also critique social attitudes toward mental health, masculinity, class, and gender expectations.

This study comparatively analyses trauma in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and *Normal People* by examining four major dimensions: the psychological impact of trauma, the relationship between memory and repression, interpersonal relationships as spaces of healing and suffering, and the process of emotional recovery. Through close textual analysis, the paper demonstrates how both authors portray trauma as a deeply personal yet socially conditioned experience.

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF TRAUMA:

Charlie in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

Charlie's emotional struggles in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* originate from childhood sexual abuse committed by his Aunt Helen. Although the memories remain repressed for most of the narrative, their psychological consequences shape Charlie's behaviour throughout the novel. His emotional sensitivity, social withdrawal, anxiety, dissociation, and depressive episodes reveal the lingering impact of unresolved trauma.

Charlie frequently experiences emotional detachment and confusion because he cannot fully understand the source of his suffering. He often retreats inward rather than confronting painful emotions directly. As Charlie states, "Sometimes people use thought to not participate in life" (Chbosky 24). This observation reflects his tendency to intellectualise emotions as a coping mechanism. His inability to process trauma causes him to internalise the emotions of others while neglecting his own emotional needs.

Chbosky portrays trauma as something that silently shapes Charlie's identity and emotional responses. Charlie struggles to express his pain verbally, admitting, "I don't know how to describe what I'm feeling. Just that it hurts all over" (52). The statement illustrates how trauma often resists language, leaving survivors unable to articulate emotional

suffering clearly. His psychological distress becomes visible through panic attacks, dissociation, and emotional breakdowns triggered by moments of intimacy and vulnerability.

Charlie's experiences correspond to symptoms commonly associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, including fragmented memory, emotional numbness, and dissociation. However, Chbosky does not reduce Charlie to his trauma alone. Instead, the novel presents his gradual recovery through friendship, therapy, writing, and emotional acceptance. Charlie's journey demonstrates how emotional support and self-expression can help survivors confront painful memories and rebuild their identities.

Marianne and Connell in *Normal People*

In *Normal People*, trauma emerges through emotional neglect, social pressure, grief, and abusive family relationships. Marianne and Connell experience trauma differently, yet both characters struggle with emotional vulnerability and self-worth.

Marianne's trauma originates primarily from her dysfunctional family environment. Her mother's emotional indifference and her brother's abusive behaviour led Marianne to internalise feelings of worthlessness. As a result, she begins to believe that she deserves

mistreatment within romantic relationships. Marianne confesses, “I don’t know why I can’t be like normal people” (Rooney 102). Her statement reveals profound insecurity and emotional alienation.

Marianne’s emotional trauma shapes her relationships with men, many of whom reinforce her negative self-image through controlling or emotionally harmful behaviour. Her willingness to tolerate suffering reflects the psychological consequences of prolonged emotional abuse. Despite her intelligence and academic success, Marianne struggles to value herself emotionally.

Connell’s trauma is less visible but equally significant. Unlike Marianne, Connell grows up in a caring household; however, he experiences intense social insecurity and emotional repression. His transition into the elite academic environment of Trinity College intensifies his feelings of alienation and inadequacy. Additionally, the suicide of his friend Rob deeply affects his mental health.

Connell’s struggle with emotional expression reflects broader societal expectations surrounding masculinity. He finds it difficult to communicate vulnerability openly, resulting in loneliness and emotional confusion. After Rob’s death, Connell admits, “I feel like I’m walking around trying on a hundred different

versions of myself” (176). The statement illustrates his fractured sense of identity and emotional instability.

Rooney portrays trauma not as a dramatic event alone but as an accumulation of emotional pressures shaped by class expectations, grief, insecurity, and silence. Both Marianne and Connell illustrate how trauma influences emotional communication, relationships, and self-perception.

MEMORY, REPRESSION, and EMOTIONAL RECOVERY

Repression in Charlie’s Narrative

Repression plays a central role in Charlie’s psychological condition. His mind suppresses memories of childhood abuse as a protective mechanism, preventing him from consciously confronting unbearable emotional pain. Throughout the novel, Charlie experiences fragmented memories, emotional confusion, and unexplained psychological distress without fully understanding their origin.

The gradual recovery of Charlie’s memories demonstrates how trauma often returns indirectly through emotional triggers. Moments of intimacy with Sam force Charlie to confront memories he has long avoided. When he finally understands the truth about his

abuse, he writes, “I finally understood what happened. And it hurt so much” (213). This moment becomes psychologically transformative because recognition of trauma is necessary for healing.

Charlie’s repression illustrates the complex relationship between memory and survival. Although forgetting temporarily protects him from emotional collapse, repression also prevents emotional growth. His inability to process trauma isolates him from others and limits his understanding of himself.

Chbosky’s narrative structure mirrors Charlie’s fragmented consciousness. The epistolary format allows readers to experience Charlie’s confusion gradually, reflecting the disjointed nature of traumatic memory itself. Through this narrative technique, Chbosky effectively portrays the psychological reality of repression and emotional recovery.

Marianne and Connell’s Relationship with Memory

In *Normal People*, memory functions differently but remains deeply connected to trauma and identity. Marianne and Connell carry emotional memories that influence their present relationships and behaviour.

Marianne’s memories of familial rejection shape her belief that she deserves emotional suffering. Her traumatic experiences become internalised as part of her identity. She reflects, “Maybe I want to be treated badly because I think I deserve it” (155). The statement reveals how trauma alters self-perception and influences interpersonal choices.

Unlike Charlie, Marianne does not completely repress her trauma. Instead, she normalises emotional pain because it has become familiar to her. Her inability to recognise healthy emotional boundaries reflects the long-term impact of abuse and neglect.

Connell’s memories are connected more closely to grief, insecurity, and social alienation. His working-class background contributes to feelings of inferiority within privileged academic spaces. Connell admits, “I never thought people like me could go here” (82). The statement reveals how memory and social identity shape emotional experience.

The memory of Rob’s suicide further intensifies Connell’s emotional struggles. He experiences guilt, loneliness, and depression because he cannot fully process his grief. Rooney demonstrates how unspoken emotions and unresolved memories create emotional isolation.

Both novels, therefore, portray memory as a psychological force that shapes identity, behaviour, and emotional relationships. Trauma survives through memory, whether repressed, internalised, or emotionally unresolved.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS: HEALING AND HARM

Charlie's Relationships

Relationships in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* function simultaneously as sources of healing and emotional vulnerability. Charlie's friendships with Sam and Patrick provide him with emotional acceptance and a sense of belonging, helping him experience moments of joy and self-worth.

For much of the novel, Charlie prioritises the emotional needs of others while neglecting his own. Sam recognises this tendency and tells him, "You can't just sit there and put everybody's life ahead of yours and think that counts as love" (200). Her observation encourages Charlie to recognise the importance of self-respect and emotional boundaries.

Charlie's relationships help him move beyond emotional isolation. Through friendship, music, literature, and shared experiences, he begins to understand the possibility of

emotional connection. However, his trauma also complicates intimacy because vulnerability triggers painful memories.

Chbosky portrays relationships as emotionally transformative spaces where healing becomes possible through empathy and acceptance. At the same time, the novel acknowledges that trauma can distort emotional communication and create fear of intimacy.

Marianne and Connell's Relationship

The relationship between Marianne and Connell represents the emotional centre of *Normal People*. Their connection provides emotional understanding and comfort, yet it is repeatedly disrupted by insecurity, silence, and miscommunication.

Marianne feels emotionally seen by Connell in ways she never experiences within her family. Connell's acceptance offers her moments of emotional safety and validation. Similarly, Connell feels emotionally authentic when he is with Marianne because she understands his vulnerabilities.

Despite their deep emotional bond, both characters struggle to communicate openly. Connell admits, "I'm not a person who's good at saying what they're feeling" (221). His emotional restraint often creates

misunderstandings that distance the couple from one another.

External social pressures further complicate their relationship. Differences in class background, peer expectations, and emotional insecurity repeatedly separate them. Rooney uses these tensions to demonstrate how social structures influence private emotional experiences.

The relationship between Marianne and Connell illustrates the dual nature of intimacy. Human connection can provide healing and emotional recognition, yet unresolved trauma and communication failures can also produce emotional suffering.

HEALING, THERAPY, AND EMOTIONAL GROWTH

Therapy and Writing in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

Charlie's recovery begins when he starts confronting the truth about his trauma through therapy and self-expression. Therapy provides him with a safe environment where painful memories can be acknowledged and processed gradually.

Writing also becomes an essential therapeutic outlet for Charlie. Through his letters, he reflects upon his emotions, relationships, fears,

and memories. The act of narration itself becomes part of his healing process because it allows him to organise fragmented experiences into a meaningful personal narrative.

Charlie's statement, "I feel infinite" (33), symbolises moments of emotional freedom and connection. Although temporary, these experiences reveal Charlie's growing ability to experience life beyond fear and trauma.

Chbosky ultimately portrays healing as a gradual process rather than a complete resolution. Recovery requires emotional honesty, supportive relationships, and the willingness to confront painful memories.

Resilience in Normal People

In *Normal People*, healing emerges through emotional growth, self-awareness, and vulnerability. Connell's decision to seek therapy after experiencing depression marks an important turning point in the novel. Therapy allows him to articulate emotions he previously struggled to express.

Marianne's recovery is less direct but equally significant. Over time, she begins recognising the emotional harm within her relationships and slowly develops greater self-awareness. Her emotional growth involves learning that affection should not require suffering.

Rooney avoids presenting healing as complete or uncomplicated. Instead, recovery remains ongoing and uncertain. This realistic portrayal reflects the complexity of emotional trauma in contemporary life.

Both Marianne and Connell demonstrate resilience through their willingness to confront emotional vulnerability. Their growth occurs not through dramatic transformation but through gradual emotional understanding and human connection.

SOCIAL CRITIQUE: TRAUMA AND SOCIETY

Both novels critique social structures that contribute to emotional suffering and silence psychological trauma. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Chbosky exposes the stigma surrounding abuse and mental illness. Charlie's silence reflects broader cultural discomfort regarding discussions of trauma and emotional vulnerability.

Similarly, Rooney critiques social expectations related to class, gender, and masculinity. Marianne's suffering reveals the emotional consequences of patriarchal family structures, while Connell's emotional repression reflects societal expectations that men should remain emotionally restrained.

Class differences also shape emotional experience in *Normal People*. Connell's insecurity at Trinity College demonstrates how social inequality affects identity and belonging. Rooney portrays emotional suffering not simply as personal weakness but as something deeply connected to social environments.

Both novels, therefore, extend beyond individual psychological experiences to critique broader societal forces that intensify trauma and prevent emotional healing. The authors emphasise the importance of empathy, communication, and social awareness in creating environments where recovery becomes possible.

CONCLUSION

Stephen Chbosky's *the Perks of Being a Wallflower* and Sally Rooney's *Normal People* provide powerful explorations of trauma, emotional vulnerability, and recovery. Through Charlie, Marianne, and Connell, both novels portray how trauma shapes identity, memory, relationships, and self-perception.

Chbosky and Rooney demonstrate that trauma is not limited to isolated events but continues to influence emotional behaviour and interpersonal dynamics over time. Both authors also emphasise that healing is neither immediate nor absolute. Instead, recovery

emerges gradually through self-awareness, emotional honesty, supportive relationships, and therapeutic intervention.

The novels further critique societal attitudes toward mental health, masculinity, class inequality, and emotional expression, illustrating how social structures contribute to psychological suffering. Ultimately, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and *Normal People* affirm the resilience of the human spirit while acknowledging the enduring complexity of trauma and recovery.

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