Sublimation of Charlie in Stephen Chbosky’s the Perks of Being a Wallflower

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Abstract

The study examines the main character in Stephen Chbosky’s The Perks of Being A Wallflower. This study discusses sublimation as the defense mechanism done by Charlie, the main character, which are associated with his childhood trauma and Oedipus complex. Freudian psychoanalysis theory will be used as the main theory, especially the discussion of psychosexual development, anxiety, and defense mechanism. This research is a qualitative research where the data is taken from the novel The Perks of Being A Wallflower, library research, journals, and other resources which are appropriate in conducting the analysis. This study finds that Charlie’s defense mechanism are associated with his childhood traumas. They are the sexual abuse by his aunt, the death of his aunt, and the death of his best friend. His trauma leads to several anxieties in his life, and to overcome the anxieties he does defense mechanism, that is sublimation. The sublimation is not only the way that he does to overcome his anxieties, but also a kind of symbolization of a friend figure he always wanted to and the symbol on how he wants to inspire other people.

Keywords: anxiety, defense mechanism, sublimation, trauma

Introduction

Trauma is something that is very familiar in our life. Almost everyone has a kind of trauma in their life. It usually relates to something bad happened in the past that makes us stressful or feels afraid to do something in the future. The stress that caused by the trauma signifies that the traumatic person has difficulty to cope with the trauma itself.

There are many things that may cause trauma in someone’s life. Those can be a big one-time incident like accidents, natural disasters, crimes, surgeries, deaths, and other violent events. It can also be repeated actions, such as child abuse, neglect, combat, urban violence, concentration camps, battering relationships, and enduring deprivation. (Giller)

Trauma might be a kind of illness that cannot be seen. Nobody will notice what trauma we have and nobody knows what causes it. That is why some people still take it easy and tend to underestimate it without realizing that it can also give a big influence to someone’s life, because it deals with the psychological condition. It can affect somebody’s behavior or view towards something, for example family and friends.

The effects of trauma are various. Most of them are related with the behavior of the people or psychological condition. The fear of being alone or becoming dependent are also a kind of trauma effect. Someone can have a personality disorder, feeling depressed, anxiety, or even eating disorder (Giller) For example, if a person ever experienced a sexual abuse in his/her childhood, the person will feel afraid to deal with any sexual experiences in their future which affected to the relationship with their partners, because he/she will automatically relate it with the bad experience in his/her childhood. He/She might even feel afraid in starting a new relationship with opposite gender. Sexual abuse might cause social anxiety, an avoidance of men or women, and a very negative self-concept resulting in suicidal depression and self-injury in middle age (Tucker-Ladd 29). In dealing with the effect of the trauma, people tend to use defense mechanism. Defense mechanism is a way to prevent the anxiety. It is used to hide the causes of childhood fears, urges, and shame (Tucker-Ladd 59). It is not only applied in the case of sexual abuse, but also in other traumatic experiences.
Defense mechanism is a kind of way to handle the fear or the anxiety felt by the traumatic person. In short ways, we can say that defense mechanism helps people dealing with their trauma. It is somehow similar to coping processes, or things that people do to cope their trauma, but both of them are different. Coping processes are conscious, intentional, learned, and associated with normal adjustment. Defense mechanisms are unconscious, unintentional, self-protective instincts or dispositions, and associated with pathology. (Cramer 895)

Sublimation is one of the Defense Mechanisms. This is similar to displacement, but takes place when we manage to displace our emotions into a constructive rather than destructive activity. This might for example be artistic. Many great artists and musicians have had unhappy lives and have used the medium of art of music to express themselves. Sport is another example of putting our emotions (e.g. aggression) into something constructive.

Sublimation is probably the most useful and constructive of the defense mechanisms as it takes the energy of something that is potentially harmful and turns it to doing something good and useful.

One of the example of sublimation can be seen in Stephen Chbosky’s novel entitled *The Perks of being A Wallflower*. This novel gives a good depiction of trauma because it tells about the childhood traumatic experience of the main character. It tells how the traumatic experience influenced the main character’s life when he grew up. The traumatic experience created a kind of fear and anxiety in his life. It also influenced the main character’s ability to socialize with others which resulted him to be excommunicated by his friends. Not only that, it also influenced his view towards several things in his life. Another good thing depicted by this novel is the defense mechanism done by the main character in dealing with the trauma.

This study will talk how the main character, Charlie, overcomes his trauma through defense mechanism. Charlie was a 15 year old boy who found difficulties to socialize with his friends, especially when he just entered high school.

**Discussion**

**Charlie’s Trauma**

There are three kinds of traumas experienced by Charlie. The first trauma is caused by the sexual abuse done by Charlie’s Aunt Helen, the second is caused by his aunt Helen’s death and the third one is caused by his best friend’s death.

The trauma about the sexual abuse done by Aunt Helen is shown when Charlie began to befriend Sam and Patrick, he started to fall in love with Sam. According to Charlie, Sam is really beautiful. ”And even though I thought Sam was very pretty and nice, and she was the first girl I ever wanted to ask on a date someday when I can drive...” (Chbosky 20)

Charlie even had a wet dream about Sam that made him feel really bad about it. He decided to tell Sam about his dream because he felt really bad for seeing Sam naked. When Charlie told Sam, he cried really hard that he doesn’t know why. Sam think that Charlie is only overthinking about his feeling, because he is too young for her.

“I told Sam that I dreamt that she and I were naked on the sofa, and I started crying because I felt bad, and do you know what she did? She laughed. Not a mean laugh, either. A really nice, warm laugh. She said that she thought I was being cute. And she said it was okay that I had a dream about her. And I stopped crying. Sam then asked me if I thought she was pretty, and I told her I thought she was "lovely." Sam then looked me right in the eye.

"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.” (Chbosky 21)
By the time they together as friends, Sam and Charlie gets closer to each other and Sam had the same feeling with Charlie. At the night before Sam left for college, they both almost had sex until Charlie stopped it because he saw his past with his Aunt Helen at a glance. He said that he felt uncomfortable doing it with Sam although it is very nice, so Sam asked Charlie to go to sleep because it’s too late to drive home.

“When I fell asleep, I had this dream. My brother and my sister and I were watching television with my Aunt Helen. Everything was in slow motion. The sound was thick. And she was doing what Sam was doing.” (Chbosky 204)

Charlie used to get a sexual abuse from his aunt when he was a child. Her aunt touched him and molested him. He didn’t know what she did back then, but it is kind of traumatize him. As the writer has mentioned above, Charlie is very close to his Aunt. This incident left a deep trauma for him.

This case can be can related with Freud’s thought “that sex was alive in the imagination in ways that needed to be explored and understood. The imagination seemed to be able to endow a person with a sexual life even though the person had no sexual life – at least, as ordinarily understood” (Lear 69). According to Freud’s hysterical theory of hysteria, sex is the root cause. Freud may have doubted the specific events, but he accepts the overall picture that sex is the root cause.

Charlie is also afraid to get close with other people. The idea of making friend scares him. He cannot believe that there is a person out there who can actually be a good friend to talk to. It is shown when he wrote his first letter and he said:

“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.” (Chbosky 2)

It is important to know that Charlie has seen someone get raped, so it scares him and cannot make him easily believe if he gets close to other person as a friend. He thinks that it is impossible for two persons to be friend without having any sexual interactions.

He knows that his Aunt Helen molested by her boyfriend long time ago, so this could be a possible reason for Charlie to think that way. Charlie said that he hate the word “molested” and it is done by someone who was very close to his aunt (Chbosky 90).

The death of his best friend, Michael, when he was in junior high school is also becoming the factor on why he is difficult and afraid to make friend with other persons. His best friend committed suicide because of ‘problems at home’.

“And I want you to know that I am both happy and sad and I'm still trying to figure out how that could be. I try to think of my family as a reason for me being this way, especially after my friend Michael stopped going to school one day last spring…….It's hard to remember. But Dave with the awkward glasses told us that Michael killed himself.” (Chbosky 2-3)

Charlie does not really have much people he gets close to. Besides Michael, Aunt Helen is the only one who really close to him outside his main family. Since her parents did not give much attention to him, his Aunt Helen is like his everything where Charlie gets everything he needed. That is why the death of his Aunt Helen on a Christmas in his 7th birthday, is like haunting him for a long time. Charlie keep blaming himself because his aunt went to buy present for him. It gives a really big impact for him. One of those is that Charlie have to be hospitalized in a mental hospital after his aunt Helen died (Chbosky 208).

**Charlie’s Anxiety**

Regarding the traumas that he felt, the anxiety emerges as the result of the conflict between id, ego, and superego. Anxiety can be an important experience because it can reveal our core issues (Tyson 16). In Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being A Wallflower*, there are several core issues that causes anxiety on Charlie.
Fear of Intimacy

In the novel, it is shown that Charlie is really difficult to have a close relationship with other person. Even though he also falls in love with Sam, the fact that he falls in love with her also hurts him. Sam is older than Charlie, and Sam said that he is too young for him. So, he avoided Sam and forced himself that he and Sam are only just friend. He said that, “I am really in love with Sam, and it hurts very much.” (Chbosky 56)

The avoidance of Charlie to gets close to other person is shown by his passivity. He tends to not ‘participating’. Charlie said that he loved Sam, but he did not do anything to make Sam feel better when she is sad. It is shown that Charlie tend to be passive and avoid to get close to other person. It is possible that Charlie thinks if he is close to person, the person will do anything for him, just like what Aunt Helen did to him, and cause himself to get hurt or sad.

Charlie tends to be passive and do not do many things to help people around him. By being passive or not participating, he can avoid any possible closeness with other people, although he actually wanted to help. He keeps saying that he really wanted to help but he just cannot do it. Charlie also do not know the importance of participating, he tend to observing people and keep the things by himself. He thinks that by observing people is also one kind of participating. So, the writer thinks that passivity is how Charlie unconsciously shows his fear of intimacy.

Low Self-esteem

In The Perks of Being a Wallflower, Charlie always thinks that there is something wrong with him. He always feels that he is different, not good, and always has problems.

When his best friend died, he also thinks that he has ‘problems at home’ (Chbosky 4). Despite of his a little ignorant parents, his family is such a loving family. He also has a good relationship with her brother and sister, although they are not really close, but they are not fighting.

Charlie’s good relationship with his brother and sister doesn’t make him confident among his family member. His brother went to college and get a scholarship as a football athlete and his sister is beautiful and popular at school. Charlie is not confident about them. He thinks that he is not good enough in his family.

“I don't think that there is a favorite kid in our family. There are three of us and I am the youngest. My brother is the oldest. He is a very good football player and likes his car. My sister is very pretty to boys and she is in the middle. I get straight A's now like my sister and that is why they leave me alone” (Chbosky 5)

Charlie is a smart student. He often gets straight A’s at school, but he never thinks that he is smart nor deserve the good grades. The teacher gave him better grades but he did not think that he gets smarter (Chbosky 4).

The low self-esteem experienced by Charlie is mostly about her family matters. Charlie’s family might be a harmonious family, but they are less supportive about Charlie, maybe it is also because Charlie is quite introvert and he sometimes afraid to tell the truth because he is afraid to make his father angry. Also his sister is sometimes angry to Charlie every time Charlie accidentally caught her had sex with her boyfriend or Charlie saw her boyfriend hit her when they fight.

Fear of Abandonment

Fear of abandonment is the fear where the person is afraid to get abandoned or ignored by the people they love. The person will always seek for the present of the loving people when they are not around, for example with a mother. It is obvious that children are afraid to lose their mother because they were very close to the mother figure since they were born. In Charlie’s case, the motherly figure is presented by his Aunt Helen. Since Aunt Helen is now lost, the anxiety appears. Charlie keeps wishing for his Aunt Helen to be ‘here’, to be with him right now. He also keeps visiting Aunt Helen’s grave.

When Charlie met Sam and Patrick, they became friends with Charlie, but they sometimes have to leave the town for family holiday. It simply raises the anxiety of Charlie when they have to leave. It scares him not to meet his friends.
During his birthday, Patrick and Sam were out of town. Charlie hopes that they make an effort to wish him happy birthday to make him happy. Charlie hopes that Sam and Patrick call him on his birthday. He said that it would make him feel much better (Chbosky 80).

Another example is when Patrick had problem with Craig where Craig’s father finally find out that Patrick and Craig are gay couple. Patrick were really down and sad at this time, but Charlie cannot do anything for him. He can only accompany Patrick, but actually he is also afraid that Patrick won’t be accompany him anymore as Patrick has his own problem. (Chbosky 186)

Charlie is also making friends with some of Patrick and Sam’s friends who are Charlie’s seniors in school. As Charlie is the youngest around his friends, he is also afraid when his friend have to go for college. (Chbosky 208).

One more example is when Charlie has to say good bye to his favourite teacher, Bill, who is more like a friend for Charlie than a teacher. Bill is the one who always encourages Charlie to explore his writing talent. Bill also encourages Charlie to ‘participate’ and gain his self-confidence to make new friends. At the last day of Bill’s class, Charlie said, “It was hard saying good-bye to Bill” (Chbosky 210).

Charlie’s Sublimation as His Defense Mechanism

When the id gets into conflict with the superego, the ego creates a measure to satisfy both areas. Freud believed that it is the relationship between the three that develops an individual’s personality. However, these conflicts may create anxiety in the ego from time to time, and in order for the three parts to function accordingly, these conflicts must be managed. This is where defense mechanisms come into play. Defense mechanisms allow certain unhappy memories or unacceptable desires to be kept buried within the unconscious.

In Chbosky’s The Perks of Being a Wallflower, Charlie, the main character of the novel, did several kinds of defense mechanism. To focus the analysis in this chapter, this study will talk about sublimation as the defense mechanism done by Charlie.

Just like what has been stated previously, this novel is in a form of compiled letters written by Charlie addressed to a stranger he randomly picked from phonebook. So, sublimation is considered as the most appropriate defense mechanism done by Charlie.

The activity of letter writing is considered as sublimation. Because, it is known that Charlie has difficulties in expressing his feeling and to share his problem, not only to her friends, but also to his family. Moreover, Charlie also cannot believe if he trust a person to share his problem. Because in his first letter he wants to see that there is a person who didn’t sleep with his/her best friend after they get close to each other.

“All I remember from the rest of that night was looking all over the house for an envelope and a stamp. When I finally found them, I wrote your address and walked down the hill past the trees to the post office because I knew that if I didn't put it in a mailbox that I couldn't get it back from, I would never mail the letter. 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.” (Chbosky 107)

The letter writing activity is simply can calm Charlie in coping with his problem. When Charlie wrote the letter to the person, he felt relieved. The relief that he felt is the feeling when a person is successful in coping or dealing with his anxiety. For a person like Charlie, who is socially awkward, the presence of a figure for him to share to is really important. Not only because he did not really good in starting a friendship, but he tends to be passive that he did not even think he needs to participate, although his teacher has encouraged him to.

Another sublimation done by Charlie is making mix tape. Charlie often makes a mix tape for his friends as present and even makes a mix tape to be laid on his Aunt Helen’s grave.

“I made a mix tape for the occasion. It is called "The First Time I Drove." Maybe I'm being too sentimental, but I like to think that when I'm old, I will be able to look at all these tapes and remember those drives.” (Chbosky 102)
For Charlie, the mix tape is like a kind of memorial thing to mark his unforgettable moment. He made mix tape for his first driving as soon as he got his driving license. He made mix tape for Patrick as his Secret Santa present.

Making mix tape is like a kind of escape for Charlie. He thinks that by music, he can feel relief. He can also express his happiness and sadness by the song he included in the mix tapes. He thinks that music can make other people feel better. It can inspire people, that is why he makes mix tape for his close person. That is just the other way of him in showing care or love to his loving ones.

Charlie said that he had an amazing feeling when he finally held the tape in his hand. He feels that the tape had all the memories and feelings and great joy and sadness right in his hand. And he thought about how many people have loved those songs. And how many people got through a lot of bad times because of those songs. And how many people enjoyed good times with those songs. And how much those songs really mean. He even wanted to write a song. He wanted to make people happy because of the songs he wrote, just like exactly what he feels when he listens to his favourite songs (Chbosky 71).

Reading books can be one option to spend leisure time. Some people just loves reading books because it can make them feel better, so does Charlie. He loves reading book. His reading hobby is started when she was a kid and reading the book collection of his aunt Helen.

“….she [Aunt Helen] used to give me books to read. My father said that the books were a little too old for me, but I liked them so he just shrugged and let me read.” (Chbosky 12)

Charlie’s reading hobby also made him to get a new friend, his English teacher named Bill. While most of Charlie’s classmates hate reading and did not read the novel Bill asked them to, Charlie have read the novel and can explain about it well. He even can write a good essay about the book.

“My advanced English teacher asked me to call him "Bill" when we're not in class, and he gave me another book to read. He says that I have a great skill at reading and understanding language, and he wanted me to write an essay about To Kill a Mockingbird.” (Chbosky 16)

Bill is not only a teacher to Charlie, but also a friend. They were really close. Bill can understand Charlie that he is different. He often talks to Charlie about many things, and Charlie also share his problem to Bill. Bill has been a really good friend and mentor for Charlie.

By the end of the school year, Bill decided to resign and leave the school. But he talks to Charlie that they still can be friends. He even invited Charlie to his home and he said that Charlie can borrow books.

"So, when the school year ends, and I'm not your teacher anymore, I want you to know that if you ever need anything, or want to know about more books, or want to show me anything you write, or anything, you can always come to me as a friend. I do consider you a friend, Charlie.” (Chbosky 196)

Bill is also understands how special Charlie is. He thinks that Charlie is very smart. So he drives Charlie to write so many essay so that he can explore his intelligence in a good way. Bill knows that Charlie loves writing, just like most people do if they love reading. Bill said that Charlie is one of the most gifted people he has ever known. That is why he gave Charlie the extra work (Chbosky 195).

His reading hobby is definitely a kind of escape for Charlie. He felt calm after he is reading a book. The same feeling after he made a mix tape.

“I am starting to see a real trend in the kind of books Bill gives me to read. And just like the tape of songs, it is amazing to hold each of them in the palm of my hand.” (Chbosky 71)

That is why reading books, which resulted him in writing essays about them, is considered as sublimation done by Charlie. Moreover, Charlie’s new friends, Sam and Patrick, realize that Charlie is good in writing so they gave him a secondhand old typewriter. They want Charlie to write a book about them.

Sublimation cannot be consciously explained because it appears from the interpersonal matrix of experience as an activity which persists. But in Charlie’s case, the sublimation is simply unexplained for him. Just like any other defense mechanism, it appears unconsciously. The only thing that he knows is
that he enjoys doing the writing, reading, or creating mix tapes, and those things can make him feel better. The sublimation he did is also a kind of need for him, unconsciously, because he feels uncomfortable if he did not write the letter to the ‘friend’.

Charlie enjoys writing because it is a kind of self-help for him to reduce his anxiety. As he is quite difficult in making friends, moreover sharing his problems, the letter writing is a kind of self-help for him. By doing that, he is not only helping himself, but also helping other people or inspire other person whom Charlie sent his letters to.

He is really aware about other people’s happiness that he always mentioned about other person’s happiness, that is why he loves making mix tapes, because it is another way he can do to make people happy. In his mix tapes, he is not only putting songs just the way it is, but also he arrange the songs so that they have memories, they are like talking to the person who listens to them to make the person feels better. He loves music and music can makes him happy, so he also wants to make others happy because of music, too. By doing those things, Charlie is indirectly also healing himself from his trauma, he is unconsciously wants to struggle for his, or even other people’s better life.

The spirit of gaining better life shows that Charlie is not only driven by Thanatos or the death drive, but also with the Eros or the life drives as the forces that seek to preserve living substance and bind it in ever larger physical and social units, according to De Lauretis. Valdre also agrees with the statement, which he mentions in her book, On Sublimation: A Path to the Destiny of Desire, Theory, and Treatment, that sublimation remains on the realms of Eros. It is just opposite with Thanatos that unbind and unleashing destruction, while Eros is to bind, keeping together, and so operate life (Valdre 47).

In Charlie’s case he is not only struggling for the life of himself, but also he wants to inspire other people which means he helps other people’s life, too. He make mix tapes to make his friend happy, he wrote letters to share his feelings and to help the people who read them. In some cases Thanatos overwhelmed him, but in other cases, he still got Eros that makes him ‘handle’ his life in another form positively.

The transferring form of his trauma into something positive can be seen as a kind of symbolization. According to Valdre, sublimation is closely linked to symbolization. It can be seen that Charlie’s desire to make himself happy and other person happy is by making them mix tapes, also the letters and the stranger he wrote the letters to are the symbol of a friend figure he always wanted to and the symbol on how he wants to inspire other people.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that Charlie finds difficulties in coping with his trauma at first. However, it can finally be solved by doing the defense mechanism to transfer his anxiety into things he enjoys doing. The result of the analysis also becomes evidence that Freudian psychoanalysis is applicable in exploring the main character in this novel. Apparently, there are several influences associated with the trauma happened to Charlie related to his family and friends relationship, and also his self-confidence.

The analysis of the novel also reveals that the importance of childhood age as suggested by Freud becomes evidence in this novel. The analysis of the novel proves that childhood experience can deeply influence someone’s personality development. However, the unpleasing childhood experience that causes trauma, can be reduce or overcome by doing defense mechanism, such as sublimation, just like what Charlie does in the novel.

Works Cited


