

The Detrimental Affect Sexual Abuse has on Mental Wellbeing as Shown in 'Pop-Culture' and Modern Literature

Holly King

Abstract

Rape, by definition is; 'The crime, typically committed by a man, of forcing another person to have sexual intercourse with the offender against their will.'¹ Rape is caused by rapists. Not by the volume of alcohol someone has consumed, not by how a person behaves or what they happened to be wearing. Including what is beneath their clothes. Age is irrelevant. They can be either male or female, "typically by a man," although not false, the stigmatism behind the victim consistently being female with a male abuser is staggering, the OED even implies this stereotype. A stigma which Chbosky removes throughout his novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. How would having sex with a person 'against their will' affect, 'a person's condition with regard to their psychological and emotional well-being?'² Sexual abuse and its harmful psychological affects is still a taboo subject throughout contemporary culture, even in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, the reader is unaware what has happened to Charlie until the end of the novel, as is Charlie.

Sexual abuse is not gender biased, which is shown not only within our society but also in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, which rejects the stereotypical "male abuser and female victim," which is often characterised. The correlation between mental health and sexual abuse is evident, even without explicitly sharing what happened. The signs which indicate a cause for this decline, as it affects every single aspect of a person's life, are prominent. Even if they aren't expressed visually, they are often expressed psychologically. Survivors of sexual abuse may have difficulty trusting others and further determining who can be deemed trustworthy. They may also isolate themselves from their community and loved ones following acts of abuse. Charlie often shows behaviours associated with anxiety, and further feels isolated from others. Even without remembering the source of his trauma, Charlie still contends with the damage. Additional changes in behaviour may also occur, including having outbursts of anger or similar reactions. If the abuser and victim have a relationship (either romantically or related) the realisation of the breakdown in the relationship can be gradual, so the full extent of the damage is incomprehensible to

¹ OED, (2018) <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/rape>> [accessed 19 November 2018].

² OED, (2018) <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/mental_health> [accessed 19 November 2018].

the victim. As a child, the novel's protagonist, Charlie, was molested by his favourite aunt. Following this ordeal, for much of his childhood and adolescence, Charlie repressed his traumatic memories, as he lacked a positive outlet to release his tension. Unfortunately, many of the victims of abuse Charlie knows also go on to perpetrate violence, accept abuse, or both, since this is the behaviour they know. Through exploring the complex cycles of abuse and trauma that permeate families and society, Chbosky illustrates how unfortunately common trauma and abuse are, especially in the lives of young people and the search for a greater understanding, 'I want you to know that I am both happy and sad and I'm still trying to figure out how that could be.'³ But, most importantly, the understanding of oneself. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is a series of letters addressed to an unnamed "friend," and it shows how Charlie is trying to come to terms with the various events in his life, both happy and sad, and to achieve a sense of reconciliation so that he can consider himself whole. It further foreshadows the traumatic events (the suicide of his best friend and the sexual assault from his aunt) that caused Charlie the complex cycle of confusion.

Not only is sexual abuse principally a taboo subject throughout literature, as is mental health, but it is romanticised in "pop-culture." We might take the DC comic book couple, Harley Quinn and The Joker, as an example. It is an ego defence that may at least partially underlie the apparent paradoxical psychological phenomenon that the criminologist and psychiatrist Nils Bejerot coined as 'Stockholm Syndrome', which is characterised by a captive falling in love with or empathising with their captive: the victim is manipulated, causing a feeling mistaken for love. Similar to Charlie's childhood, Harley in the comics was born in an abusive household and her father, was a con man. This parallel between literature and "pop-culture" shows that within an environment where abuse is known about, especially to children, it is more likely to continue into adulthood as 'We accept the love we think we deserve,'⁴ due to a low self-esteem. A capture-bonding response is deeply ingrained into the human psyche; thus, the captivity is the activation or partial activation that could explain the counterintuitive behaviour seen. This due to the fact that, 'most of human history has been played out in hunter-gatherer societies in which abductions, particularly of women and their dependent children'⁵ take place, as Burton suggests. Therefore, it

³ Stephen Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (London: Simon and Schuster UK Ltd, 1997), p. 3.

⁴ Chbosky, p. 27.

⁵ Neal Burton M.D., 'What Underlies Stockholm Syndrome?: Why some hostages become emotionally attached to their captors.', *Psychology Today*, (2012), <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/hide-and-seek/201203/what-underlies-stockholm-syndrome>> [accessed 24 November 2018].

is possible to envisage that the capture-bonding phenomena is a psychological response, not just naivety or acceptance of treatment.

A lasting imprint is left in the memory of the victim - it affects every aspect of their mental wellbeing. Gaslighting is a means of psychological manipulation used to make a person question their own memory, perception, and sanity, it is a tactic to gain more control over the victim, making it an extremely effective form of emotional abuse. By withholding, countering, diverting, trivialising, or seeming to forget what their victim is talking about, the ability to trust one's own perceptions is broken down, making the victim more likely to stay in the abusive relationship. Over time, however, as these abusive behaviours continue, they can become anxious, confused, depressed, and isolated, whilst losing all sense of what is actually happening. The victim may become increasingly dependent on their partner to define reality, creating a difficult situation to escape from. The term comes from the film *Gaslight* (1944) where a husband manipulates his wife to the point where she thinks she is losing her mind, by dimming the gaslights in their home and denying and lying about the decreasing brightness. If psychological devices are coupled alongside physical abuse, how would it affect the mental capacity of a person? The lasting, sometimes life-long, impression can affect them in almost every aspect of their life.

The Me Too movement (or #MeToo movement), with many local and international alternatives, is a movement against sexual harassment and sexual assault. In order to make rape culture less stigmatised, the practice of the word "rape" needs to be normalised, with a reduction of the exploitation of it. A feature of many polite discussions about rape is the refusal to talk about rape, instead it is 'taking advantage' of someone and discussing a person's 'inappropriate behaviour'. The incident is even described as, simply 'having sex'. An issue with normalising this behaviour as well as the euphemisms for rape is that it legitimises what the rapist has done, 'having sex' suggests that it was a mutual desire, when it is two separate actions.

'Approximately 85,000 women and 12,000 men are raped in England and Wales alone every year; that's roughly 11 rapes (of adults alone) every hour. These figures include assaults by penetration and attempts.'⁶ The use of language and how it is chosen to be expressed softens the idea of rape, therefore a taboo surrounds the very word; perhaps this aids the abuser as 'conviction rates for rape are far lower than other crimes, with only 5.7% of reported rape cases ending in a conviction for the perpetrator'⁷ which is every six in 1000 convicted. This suggests that the silence ought to be broken through healthy outlets, in addition to the breaking of the stigma

⁶ Rape Crisis, *Statistics* (2018) <<https://rapecrisis.org.uk/statistics.php>> [accessed 26 November 2018].

⁷ Kelly L., Lovett J, Regan, *A Gap or a Chasm? Attrition in reported rape cases*(: , 2005), in readinglists@leicester, <<http://readinglists.le.ac.uk/items/16C10366-F4DB-4BC5-4BAC-E398120A4939.html>> [accessed 26 November 2018].

and stereotypes. It is important to recognise that rape shouldn't be normal or common occurrence.

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