

Sweet Sorrow: How David Nicholls presents growth in relation to coming of age.

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Word Count: 1678 words

Key Words: Coming of Age, Working Class, Youth, Relationships, Aspiration.

Abstract:

This article explores how David Nicholls presents growth concerning coming of age in *Sweet Sorrow*. I explore themes such as the opposite sex, sex, drugs and family tribulations; which lead the protagonist Charlie to 'Come of Age'. Furthermore, discussed throughout the article is the breakdown of Charlie's home life, which is a key factor in why he has no aspirations for himself. The article also explores how by joining 'The Company' the reader sees the growth of Charlie as a person through meeting and falling in love with Fran and by also realizing there are things he would like to do with his future, something which he had no desire of doing at the beginning of the novel. Another topic discussed in the article examines why Nicholls' writing becomes relatable for the reader which in turn makes it easier to see growth through coming of age within Charlie.

Sweet Sorrow is a book based around a working-class boy in 1997 who encounters challenges particularly to do with coming of age. The protagonist, Charlie Lewis, is a 16-year-old boy who throughout the novel has worries and troubles relating to fears of the future, of the opposite sex, of intercourse, of drugs and family tribulations. We meet many characters within the novel that have already or will have to face situations where they grow as characters. Throughout this article, I will uncover ways in which Nicholls uses settings, characters which could arguably be viewed as taboo and changes in emotions that ultimately all lead to coming of age.

Early on within the novel, we see Charlie struggle with the fast-approaching reality of adolescence. The root of his denial stems from his aspirations to have a fulfilling summer “summer lay ahead and in this interval between past regret and future fear, might it not be possible to have fun?”. His disregard for his exams and the outcome of his future suggests to the reader that he is not ready nor prepared for adolescence. The lack of self-confidence “but I didn’t get the grades” is what we first see as a main characteristic of Charlie.

As we learn throughout the novel Charlie’s home is wrought with financial worries, and the tension from his parents' marriage breakdown is causing him deep distress and sadness. The high of finishing his last day of school slowly turns into an emotion of dread ¹“and I walked back to the house where I now live alone with my father”. The tone of this sentence presents the reader with a feeling of abandonment as we can see he is not happy with his current home situation.

Nicholls presents a direct contrast between the Lewis’ old living situation in comparison to their current one, ²“we’d moved out the ‘big’ house, the family house”, which highlights warmth and wholeness as he describes it as their family home, a place where he felt most safe. “but the big house was gone. Now dad and I lived on the eighties estate”. A sense of loss is evident here and it is clear to the reader that Charlie is not only missing the loss of the big house in its physical state but also the people he lost from it, that being his mother and sister.

We see more examples as the novel goes on of how unconcerned Charlie is for himself and others around him, ³“all I knew is that dad didn’t want to be alone, and so I'd leave”. We witness a level of resentment from Charlie towards his father some may say for the failure of their family unit and financial situation which leads readers to believe that is a key factor into why Charlie has no aspirations for himself. ⁴According to studies it is suggested that “Greater father involvement in children’s lives has been found to be associated with benefits for parents and children alike with the benefits extending at least through adolescence” the lack of a father figure

¹ David Nicholls, *Sweet Sorrow* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2019).

² David Nicholls, *Sweet Sorrow* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2019).

³David Nicholls, *Sweet Sorrow* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2019).

⁴ Karen Meteyer and Maureen Perry-Jenkins, "Father Involvement Among Working-Class, Dual-Earner Couples", *Fathering: A Journal Of Theory, Research, And Practice About Men As Fathers*, 8.3 (2010), 379-403 <<https://doi.org/10.3149/fth.0803.379>>.

to look to can be regarded as the reason Charlie has no aspirations for his future. We witness a level of nostalgia and wistfulness that things will go back to how they used to be when Charlie talks about his old house.

When we are first introduced to Fran the description used is very detailed in comparison to other characters we've met thus far. A specific attention is paid to her physical appearance ⁵“she was a little shorter than me but not much, her pale skin, her hair black and short but with a longer fringe that she now stowed away behind her ear” which suggests to the reader that Charlie is paying a particular interest in her, something we have not seen from him yet. He is aware of his cheekiness ⁶“because I was sixteen, I let my eyes slip out of focus to disguise the fact I was looking at her breasts, confident that no girl had spotted this trick” which suggests to readers he’s aware of his sexuality however has never openly expressed that due to his age and how he views himself in the world.

When the two characters meet Charlie immediately spots the differences between them ⁷“You're Chatsborne yeah?...because Chatsborne kids were posh” he then goes on to explain in the most detail why he knows Fran is from Chatsborne and why he is so different ⁸“just finished at Merton Grange, I said and watched, expecting the unusual emotions, the face you might reserve for someone who tells you they’ve just left prison”. His lack of confidence, and immediate assumption of the type of person Fran is, becomes evident into how he views the world. This may be what we assume from people of a working-class background however a study looking into *The Role of Social Class in the Formation of Identity* suggests this is not the case ⁹“the affluent students regarded social class as significantly more important to identity than did the lower-income students, were more aware of structural factors contributing to their success and had higher occupational aspirations”. Although we do not see this from Charlie currently, we see his outlook on life change when he joins The Company with Fran and we begin to see him believe that there is a level of purpose that he brings along with witnessing himself slowly grow as a person.

Critics say that the relationship between Charlie and Fran is how Nicholls creates such a great sense of nostalgia for readers as we all have somewhat experienced some of the themes present within the novel. When talking about having sex for the first time Charlie becomes embarrassed and puts off by the idea that “my dad's always home...and there was the issue of the bunkbed which still embarrassed me” all challenges and emotions many of the readers would be able to relate too.

⁵ David Nicholls, *Sweet Sorrow* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2019).

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⁷ David Nicholls, *Sweet Sorrow* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2019).

⁸ David Nicholls, *Sweet Sorrow* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2019).

⁹ Elizabeth Aries and Maynard Seider, "The Role Of Social Class In The Formation Of Identity: A Study Of Public And Elite Private College Students", *The Journal Of Social Psychology*, 147.2 (2007), 137-158
<<https://doi.org/10.3200/socp.147.2.137-158>>.

Throughout the novel, there is mention of flat characters such as "the Vietnamese girl from merton grange, a foppish young man, a diligent black man and a lesbian"¹⁰ "there were two-and only two types of lesbians and Helen was not the kind found in the pages of Martin Harper's magazine". Although based in 1997 this novel is way beyond its time as the mention of these characters brings a contemporary tone to the novel. It is suggested that attitudes towards homosexuality at the time were fast changing however not fully accepted¹¹ "the first part of the present study showed that public opinion of this minority group has become more positive over time". The use of these characters is not to change the narrative or bring any emotional depth but instead to add a level of realism and modernism to the narrative.

Nicholls uses language to present a juxtaposition when the kids take drugs. Charlie on multiple occasions tells the reader "the pill had no affect", "the drugs had no affect" however the erratic behaviour and the alertness to everything going on around him suggests that in fact they are working.

We as readers witness many examples of how Nicholls presents growth through coming of age. When we first meet Charlie, he has no aspirations for himself, however throughout the novel we see him find love, try drugs for the first time, live through family difficulties and have a goal for what he wants in the future. The character of Charlie we are first introduced to is not the Charlie we leave the book having read about which shows a tremendous level of growth through coming of age.

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