

“Choke” Chuck Palahniuk Book Review

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Victor Mancini, the protagonist, did not have a happy childhood as his mother was constantly committing crimes; therefore, she was mostly in jail. Victor was mostly brought up by other families so he grew up without family affection. Today Victor is in his twenties, but he has got problems. Victor feels lonely and he cannot forget his past. He tries to forget his loneliness and has become sex addicted. He intentionally chokes while eating in expensive restaurants, and there is always someone who saves him. A close relationship between him and his saver starts. His saver even sends him money. But Victor is not doing this for money. Another problem he has: Victor thinks he is Jesus Christ and he likes this idea because this will help him to realize he could be a nice guy. Victor never means to deceive other people. He does all these things to get attention of people. He is searching for love, he is seeking for affection.

Keywords: Choke; Loneliness; Affection; Attention

Introduction

“Victor, his name unironic, emerges winningly from his ordeals and sets off on a quest for personal meaning. And there’s your allegory. The world of Choke is like a jaded adolescent’s version of our own; Victor, an Everyman struggling to find the true path. He’s not a defined character but an angsty blank for readers to “relate to” (Patterson, 2001).

This study tries to reveal that Victor is not someone who manipulates people, but a nice guy who needs love and affection of people. His being sex addict, his choking on his food, his thinking that he is Jesus Christ is not to deceive people. Victor who has been looking for happiness, is in need of love. He is looking for a warm embrace. He is looking for a tender look.

Choke: Deceive or Affection?

The protagonist, Victor Mancini, is between his 20s - 30s. He is a dropout from medical school and works at a park (at a tourist attraction where Victor teaches children about 18th century). From the beginning of the novel Victor complains about his mother and the way she has brought him up. Victor’s mother had lots of troubles and her life was full of crimes. “After I was born, my mum just stayed put in the States. Not in this house. She didn’t live here until her last release, after the school bus theft charge. Auto theft and kidnapping.” (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 37) and Victor knows about her personality. “It’s a safe bet they don’t know about her obscenity conviction, her attempted murder conviction, her reckless endangerment, her animal harassment.” (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 37) Victor’s mother has never showed him real affection. She has spent most of her time either in jail or mental hospital so she has never been a caring mother. Today Victor is a young man but he doesn’t have happiness because he cannot forget the past. He cannot forget how

her mother treated him.

Victor Mancini is a sex addict who attends the meetings to get over his problem. Victor does not make love with girls because he likes it. All he needs is attention of people. “For the next I don’t know how long, I’ve got no problems in the world. No mother. No medical bills. No museum job. No jerk-off best friend. Nothing. I feel nothing. Just for these minutes, I don’t feel lonely.” (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 10) Victor continues to look for attention through sex, Victor feels alone so he is seeking for something to be happy. Sex is a way for him to forget his loneliness.

Victor Mancini’s mother stays in a hospital because she suffers from Alzheimer and she has become very forgetful. She doesn’t even recognize Victor. Victor does not have a strong relationship with his mother. Victor cannot forget how she brought him up. He does not appear to like her but he feels he has to look after her so he needs to pay her hospital bills. Victor has found a way to pay for his mother’s hospital bills by pretending to choke on his food in expensive restaurants. When he chokes on his food someone rescues him from death. By saving him, his saver feels sorry about him and he carries on looking after Victor. His saver sends Victor cards, letters and even money.

Victor Mancini is in search of love. He has been always neglected by his mother. As a child, he was saved by a man when he choked on his food and Victor became very happy when people showed him affection. Victor has never seen this kind of fondness from his mother so he cannot forget the past. “You know the old phrase ‘Those who don’t remember the past are condemned to repeat it?’ Well, I think those who remember their past are even worse off.” (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 99)

“The story exists mostly in the present but also flashes to periods in Victor’s past when he remembers his mom doing strange things. These flashbacks allow the reader to discover

that Victor's mom was a sort of radical in her day, and the reader slowly uncovers some of the mysteries in Victor's relationship to his mother, as well as her bizarre teachings." (Early, 2010)

Throughout the book Victor always remembers his past and he blames his mother for every problem he has in his life. "The story explores Victor Mancini's journey through life from the time he was a child, to present time. Piece by piece Palahniuk reveals some of Victor's past providing insight to Victor's current life. From his dysfunctional love for his mother to his raging sexual addictions, the past brings light to the present." (Joe, 2008) Once his mother made him stand half-naked in the snow when he was a little kid. "Don't look. Don't move a muscle or you'll ruin all my work, Control yourself, damn it. Hold still or you'll ruin all my work." (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 3) His mother was very harsh against him. Victor was freezing in snow and his mother did not care about it at all. His mother even threatened to hit him. "This will be worth a little suffering, so hold still, and don't make me spank you." (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 4) The way his mother treated him shows how much she loved him. At present Victor is looking for love in different ways. Because Victor did not have loving care and attention in his childhood, he chokes intentionally in search of compassion. "Somebody saves your life, and they'll love you forever, it's as if now you're their child." (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 24) He misses a nice family atmosphere because he never had his own family. His mother was in jail and he was with different families so they were most of the time far from each other. Victor is looking for a warm embrace. When they were together his mother never gave him real family happiness. Victor thinks he is a like a family with those who save him. "But I can build my own family." (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 38)

Victor chokes on his food intentionally but when being saved by somebody else he wants to save somebody else which shows there is something nice inside him because he thinks of other people. "And it's funny when somebody saves you, the first thing you want to do is save other people. All other people. Everybody." (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 19)

Victor Mancini, though the way she brought him up, likes his mother. He dropped out of school to look after her. He thinks he has to find a job to take care of his mother. "Despite the misery she put him through in childhood (revealed in an increasingly horrific series of flashbacks), he wants to be a good boy and take care of her." (Zaleski, 2001)

Victor has been working too much. He needs to pay for his mother's bill. He feels responsible for his mother. "Victor is so busy because he's out every night, literally killing himself to pay her bills for constant care. That's three grand each month just to break even. Maybe that's why Victor left school. I say, just for the sake of argument, that maybe Victor's doing his frigging best." (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 22)

Victor constantly visits his mother in the hospital although mostly she does not recognize him. Victor always asks doctor whether she is getting better. Victor really cares about her and asks the doctor to do her best to recover her. "If there is anything you can do to save her and you don't, you're killing her with neglect." (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 55) His taking care of his mother shows that Victor is a nice guy.

Victor always remembers his past and accuses his mother because she has never been an affectionate mother to him. He has never received attention from his mother and blames his mother's bringing him up for his problems. "All my life, I've

been less my mother's child than her hostage. The subject of her social and political experiments. Her own private lab rat." (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 56)

But Victor cares about his mother and he does everything to save her from her sickness. He really wants her to get better. "I just want one person I can rescue. I want one person who needs me. Who can't live without me." (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 56)

Victor loves his mother and he does not want to lose her. "I am terrified of losing her." (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 56) When his mother died in the hospital Victor was very sad of losing her. His relationship with his mother has never been close but he feels downhearted when he has lost her. "Because now I'm an orphan. I'm unemployed and unloved. Because my guts hurt, and I'm dying anyway, from the inside out." (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 133)

Victor's mother used to keep a diary and Victor thinks there is some secret about him written in it, but the diary is written in Italian. Dr. Marshall, his mother's doctor, says she knows Italian and translates the diary of his mother to Victor. Dr. Marshall says his mother thinks Victor is Jesus Christ. Victor likes this idea and he thinks he might be a nice guy. "This becomes challenging when Victor is seduced by a strange hospital worker calling herself Dr. Marshall, who shows him his mother's diary; it describes her self-impregnation by a holy relic she believes to be the foreskin of Jesus. This has a profound effect on Victor, who is stunned by the possibility that there may be some good in him after all." (Zaleski, 2008: p. 2001) Victor looks for happiness so he accepts the idea that he is Jesus Christ. Victor now tries to be a nice guy.

After Dr. Marshall told him that he was Jesus Christ, Victor Mancini has started to realize that he is a good-hearted person and started to ask people around him what they really think about his personality. "You don't think I'm a good hearted person, do you? You don't think I'm really a secretly sensitive and Christlike manifestation of perfect love?" (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 77) Victor often asks his best friend Denny if he thinks Victor is a nice guy or not. "I'm not good and kind and caring, you don't really think I'm anything like Jesus Christ, do you?" (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 80) The idea that Victor is a Jesus Christ, is a manipulation of Dr. Marshall. In spite of the fact that Victor has been manipulated by Dr. Marshall who tells him he is Jesus Christ, he wants to believe her very much. Victor has already started to reveal the nice guy inside him. He does not want to repeat his previous mistakes. "From now on, I want to try and be a better person. Choking in restaurants, fooling people, I'm not going to do that kind of thing anymore. Sleeping around, casual sex, that kind of thing." (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 113)

Victor wants to change and always asks the same question to himself before he does something wrong. "What would Jesus not do?" (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 85) Victor changes his mind when he was about to make love with his mother's doctor, he did not rape the girl although she asked Victor to do it. For the first time Victor actively changes his life. He refuses sex and tells Nico (his sex partner) he needs to move to the fourth step of the sex addict program which shows he is getting better. Victor realizes the nice guy inside him and has the ability to control his life and manners now. Victor has always suffered from deprivation, he has been always deprived of love and affection by his mother and now constantly looking for attention of people. He uses his being sex addict, his choking on his food in restaurants, his accepting the idea that he is Jesus Christ to receive attention of people.

“Victor himself is an interesting character, if not for the fact that he is kind of predictable. He’s a man stuck between the ideals of absolute perfection and absolute corruption. He’s in the height of his ‘complete perfection’ beliefs and he’s actually a pretty good guy.” (Early, 2010)

Victor loses his mother. He has found out that he is not Jesus Christ and was manipulated by Dr. Marshall. He has given up choking on his food in expensive restaurants. He is not sex addict any more. In the end all these experiences he had, made him realize the nice guy inside him. Victor has got rid of his problems and for the first time in his life he is happy. “For the first time in longer than I can remember, I feel peaceful. Not happy. Not sad. Not anxious. Not horny. I am simplifying myself. Somewhere balanced in the perfect middle between happiness and sadness.” (Palahniuk, 2008: p. 133)

Conclusion

As a child Victor suffered a lot because his mother did not show much affection to him. She was not compassionate for Victor. Victor was in need of a fond embrace. “At heart, Victor is a compulsive liar-since he feels he can only be loved by lying.” (Gregg, 2010) He had to drop out of school to look after his mother who is ill. He chokes on his food on purpose in ex-

pensive restaurants to look after his mother. But Victor does it because people show him affection when they save him. They really like him. The attention he receives from his savers makes him very happy. Victor forgets his deprivation when his savers rescue him. Victor is also a sex addict. Both his choking and sex addiction are ways of looking for attention. Throughout the novel Victor struggles to find happiness, he is in search of love and affection. Victor who has been in search of love throughout the novel realizes the nice guy inside him.

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“Choke” by Chuck Palahniuk. Fiction “ paperback; Vintage; 293 pages; 2002. To be honest, I bought Chuck Palahniuk’s Choke on the strength of the opening line: “If you’re going to read this, don’t bother.” Palahniuk’s themes of the cultural and spiritual decay, the death of community and the commodification of American life, etc. etc. seemed old news to me. I would like to know if he is capable of writing a genuinely heartfelt human portrait rather than the entirely one-dimensional and representational characters in this book. This is probably my favourite Palahniuk novel. I appreciate that his books all have a cynical edge, but I like what he does with narrative and structure.