



Constructing Classroom Disability in Children’s Fiction: A Critical Discourse Analysis of R.J.Palacio’s “Wonder”

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*You're gonna reach the sky
Fly . . . Beautiful child
– Eurythmics, "Beautiful Child"*

Abstract

The present study examines contemporary trends in children’s fiction, particularly looking at the portrayal of disability in R.J. Palacio’s *WONDER* (2012) and its film adaptation. The study explores how such representations contribute to shaping inclusive attitudes among young readers and examines their pedagogical implications for elementary education. Through a close reading of the text, the paper analyzes the psychological and social dimensions of August “Auggie” Pullman’s experience as a child with a craniofacial difference, emphasizing how his physical appearance affects his self-concept and social interactions. The first section investigates the correlation between disability and identity formation, while the second examines the Pullman family’s adaptive strategies using frameworks like Family Resilience and Family Systems-Illness models. These perspectives illuminate how familial support mediates both the challenges and acceptance of disability.

The third section emphasizes the role of the classroom as a microcosm of society, analyzing peer interactions, bullying, and empathy in order to gauge how educational spaces shape collective attitudes toward difference. The study thus evaluates how Palacio’s narrative challenges traditional depictions of disability by fostering empathy, tolerance, and acceptance among readers. It also considers how the novel’s Mult perspectival narration allows readers to engage with diverse emotional and ethical standpoints, thus deepening social understanding.

Extending beyond *WONDER*, the paper situates the novel within a broader discourse on inclusivity and cultural diversity in children’s literature, encompassing picture books, graphic novels, and young adult fiction. It argues that such narratives not only reconstruct perceptions of disability but also serve as transformative pedagogical tools that encourage social awareness and emotional literacy. Ultimately, this study underscores the vital role of inclusive storytelling in nurturing empathy and promoting social change through children’s fiction.

Keywords: *inclusive, pedagogical, self-concept, discourse, diversity, disability*

The (Un)Conventionality of Disability: An Introduction

The depiction of impairment— whether oral, literal, or metaphorical- has frequently found its place within the literary canon. In tales that unfold alongside their more conventional counterparts i.e. “regular”



characters, these characters endeavor to establish unique realms of their own. However, the fictional spaces or roles assigned to them invariably differ from those occupied by their typical peers, underscoring a complex dynamic of representation and narrative function. In "Narrative Prosthesis," Mitchell and Snyder contend that impairment is employed in literature in the guise of "narrative prosthesis", functioning primarily in two ways: first, as a conventional element of characterization, and second, as a metaphorical device that is opportunistically utilized (Snyder, 2001). They suggest that disability functions as a narrative device that exposes and challenges the "normalizing truths" prevalent in society. It reveals the dependency of artistic and cultural discourses on the alterity assigned to individuals with disabilities, thus questioning established norms.

An illustrative example of narrative prosthesis can be found in the character of Quasimodo from Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. Quasimodo, who is physically deformed and deaf, serves as a cogent narrative instrument that helps augment the themes of isolation, societal judgment, and the nature of beauty. Quasimodo's physical impairment is a defining characteristic that shapes his identity and experiences. His deformity elicits sympathy and revulsion from others, allowing the narrative to explore societal attitudes toward disability and difference. This characterization typifies a "stock feature," making him a poignant symbol of the marginalized.

Garland-Thomson's examination of the representation and construction of disability in *Extraordinary Bodies* similarly uncovers the widespread use of disability as a narrative device. Through an analysis of cultural artifacts, including literature, film, and television, Garland-Thomson demonstrates that culturally motivated representations of disablement aid a politics of the kind of appearance that is objectively normative- in which some traits, dispositions, and functions become the foible of inferiority or deviance that manifest elaborately, while others dwindle into a "neutral, disembodied, universalized norm". (Thomson, 2017)

Need of Study

The fundamental justification of this study stems from the pressing need to critically research how disabilities are portrayed in children's literature, specifically in R.J. Palacio's "Wonder," a well-known work that shapes young readers' opinions of people with disabilities. By employing Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper aims to uncover the underlying ideologies and societal norms reflected in the narrative, highlighting how such representations can either reinforce stereotypes or promote empathy and understanding.

Additionally, the story's examination of family dynamics sheds light on how crucial supportive settings are for building resilience in kids with disabilities. Ultimately, this paper seeks to enrich the scholarly dialogue surrounding disability representation in literature, advocating for inclusive educational practices that challenge prejudices and encourage kindness, thereby promoting a more accepting and empathetic society.

Objectives

- The analytical framework follows a three-part progression, with the first one focusing on how Auggie's physical attributes and disability affect his psychological growth and worldview. The study then looks at the Pullman family's coping mechanisms for Auggie's disability, using the Family Resilience theory to comprehend their adaptation techniques. The study concludes by examining how the classroom environment shapes perceptions of disability, with a central focus directed towards Auggie's interactions with his peers.



- A close reading of the novel will allow us to gauge how the novel depicts the impact of bullying, empathy, and inclusion on classroom dynamics.
- The study shall examine the novel's social and cultural commentary on disability, especially as it relates to prejudice, acceptance, and tolerance. to investigate how the book presents different viewpoints and questions conventional narratives about disability.
- Centering on reader response and impact, the paper will consider the novel's portrayal of disability influences readers' perceptions and attitudes.
- The paper examines the wider role that picture books, comics, and young adult novels play in fostering empathy, understanding, and social change in relation to a larger spectrum of inclusivity and cultural diversity in children's fiction.

Review of Literature

Throughout the last two decades, scholarly explorations of representations of disability in literature and film have emerged, offering more complex ways to understand and conceptualize the power of representation in relation to disability. Works such as David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2000) and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997) are foundational in approaching representations of disability. Angela M. Smith's *Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema* (2011) adds to this growing interest in representations of disability, bringing specific focus to the early decades of horror cinema in the United States. In addition to these foundational works, Michael Bérubé's *The Secret Life of Stories: From Don Quixote to Harry Potter, How Understanding Intellectual Disability Transforms the Way We Read* (2016) proffers more formalist and narratological ways of reading disability.

Methodology

The paper shall appoint a qualitative approach focused on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how disability is portrayed in R.J. Palacio's "Wonder." The primary text will be analyzed in conjunction with supplementary materials, including academic articles, reviews, and critiques that discuss disability representation in literature. In addition to analysing the language and narrative structure used to depict the character of Auggie Pullman and his interactions with peers and family, the analysis will concentrate on identifying important disability-related themes, such as acceptance, bullying, and resilience. By employing CDA, the paper will uncover the underlying ideologies and societal norms that inform the portrayal of disability, revealing how these constructs influence readers' perceptions. Additionally, the dynamics of the Pullman family will be analyzed through the lens of Family Resilience Theory to highlight the role of familial support in Auggie's development and acceptance. To warrant that observations and conversations are conducted respecting subjective experiences, ethical considerations will be taken into account. Aiming to offer sagacity that may guide educational practices and foster empathy and understanding among young readers, the findings will be placed within the larger conversation on disability representation in children's literature.



Results and Discussion:

R. J. Palacio's Wonder: A Tryst With the (Extra) Ordinary

R.J. Palacio's "Wonder" is one such conventional narrative of acceptance, with an unconventional protagonist at the forefront. Palacio's novel begins with a scathing critique of society's looking glass, as Auggie Pullman, the novel's protagonist, establishes his (ab)normalcy. He regurgitates how painfully aware he is of him not being an "ordinary" child. He draws a non-negotiable line between what it is to do ordinary things, and to be ordinary. However severe his impairment is, Auggie Pullman- the ten-year old demure child *feels* ordinary inside. It is only the social gaze towards his impairment that makes his ordinariness somewhat uneasy to accept. Auggie proceeds to recount, with the unassuming gentleness of a ten years old child, the manner in which his physical disability alarms, even apprehends the people around him. As a matter of fact, Auggie's disability manifests itself both literally and metaphorically. In a literal sense, he is affected by a very rare syndrome named Treacher Collins Syndrome, which drastically affects his physiological structure of the face (Vimalan, 2024). He got affected by this syndrome when he was in the womb itself and was born with a malformed face, with tiny ears, misplaced eyes and an irregular mouth and jaw line. Additionally, Auggie's facial difference is metaphor for otherness, by the virtue of his incapacity to conform to socially constructed norms of beauty.

Primarily, August Pullman's disability is to be looked at through a societal mirror i.e. the manner in which his illness is perceived within his middle school classroom environment at Beecher Prep school. The classroom essentially acts as a threshold for August's ritual initiation into a sort of otherness. His first day at Beecher Prep is a significant moment where his disability is immediately apparent. As he enters the classroom, he experiences the stares and whispers of his classmates, which underscores the discomfort and curiosity surrounding his appearance. This moment sets the tone for his experiences in the school environment. Julian, Auggie's peer, stands as an embodiment of social prejudices that (more often than not) claim the minds of children. In a connotative remark within the classroom setting, Julian calls August "Darth Sidious". August's interactions with Julian further establish him as the other-ed classmate who is to be noticed, remarked against, but not talked to. "No one sat next to me...", states Auggie, his tone hinting submissive despondency. In Mr. Browne's class, Auggie is introduced to the concept of "precepts," which are moral lessons. This setting allows Auggie to share his thoughts and feelings about his disability indirectly through discussions about kindness and acceptance. Mr. Brown's precept that states, "when given the choice between being right and being kind, choose kind" (Palacio, 2012), acts as a presentiment for Auggie's subsequent acceptance by his immediate social circle in school.

According to psychological and developmental research, students with disabilities' perceptions of their academic and social competence are greatly influenced by social comparison processes. Low self-esteem and increased psychological vulnerability can originate from these learners' tendency of associating stigma with unfavourable social benchmarks (B.P. Ackerman, 2004). As a result, these learners tend to believe that they are not as intellectually strong as their peers who are relatively high achievers in regular classes. Auggie's homeschooling experience, on his first day in regular school, is very conveniently dismissed by his peer Julian as inconsequential. Julian, as a result, imposes on Auggie's body and mind, a false sense of inferiority. Infamously nicknamed as "the zombie kid", Auggie is classified as the untouchable other through a seemingly harmless game fashioned by his classmates called "The Plague". In this scenario, the classroom hierarchy is enforced through a cruel game of untouchability wherein students think that they must shun August and never physically touch him- lest they "catch the Plague" (Palacio, 2012). As is evident thus, Auggie's acceptance by his peers takes time in its coming.



These instances are a collective evidence of how the "Choose Kind" movement, promoted by the school, ultimately cultivates a supportive environment that enables Auggie to feel accepted and valued. On receiving the medal, Auggie makes a certain note: In relation to how visible his impairment is at the school, August realizes that the pity he is met with parallels the pity these peers would bestow to any paraplegic individual or any other non-verbal child. It is his subjective self-perception that allows him to think that he is ordinary. What others think has rarely ever mattered. He takes home the school's prize award with humor, observing that though he does not perform a great Hollywood trick such as "destroying a Death Star," successfully handling the challenges of fifth grade alone makes a huge achievement for any learner. (Palacio, 2012)

August Pullman's narrative thus comes full circle, beginning and ending with a tryst with ordinary-ness (or the lack thereof), and the absurd profoundness that surrounds such social notions. This underscores the transformative impact of friendship and kindness in addressing prejudice and fostering social inclusion. The ambivalence-amplification theory proposes that non-disabled individuals often nurture conflicting sentiments, from sincere empathy to underlying discomfort, when dealing with persons with disabilities (PWDs). This duality manifests as a combination of empathy and aversion. (Jenitta, 2024) An illustrative example is Jack, a student at Beecher School, who exhibits ambivalent feelings toward his classmate Auggie. Jack interacts with Auggie at first, enjoying his personality and sense of humour. However, he publicly denies their friendship in front of peers during a Halloween celebration, which has a profound impact on Auggie and ultimately causes him to stop attending school. This situation highlights the vital role that friends and family play in PWDs' lives as supporters and motivators because they frequently highlight their positive traits. On the other hand, societal attitudes that reflect a widespread ambivalence and prejudice frequently cause emotional harm to disabled people through both verbal and nonverbal actions.

The following excerpt from Shane Clifton's *Crippled Grace: Disability, Virtue Ethics, and the Good Life* articulates the harsh realities faced by PWDs in contemporary society:

"One problem of modern society, even with all its medical and technological wonders, is its implicit demand that we should live forever in perfect health. We keep our dead and dying out of sight; we abort babies that do not match our ideals of normalcy; we worship photoshopped images of beauty. In consequence, suffering, disability, and fragility come as a complete and utter shock. We just do not know what to do with them. In reality, however, there is no theological reason to assume that we should be immune to the consequences of biological existence." (Clifton, 2018)

The Pullman Family: A Case Study in the Poetics of the Family Resilience Theory

In R.J. Palacio's *Wonder*, the depiction of the Pullman family serves as a compelling illustration of family resilience theory, particularly in the context of addressing the challenges associated with Auggie's disability. Carolyn S. Henry and Amanda W. Harrist propound upon their idea of Family Resilience, which focuses on the capability of the family in "mobilizing or accessing capabilities to function effectively despite significant risk" (Kari Adamsons, 2022). According to this theory, family resilience is a multidimensional construct that encompasses (a) the ability to access and navigate culturally significant protective factors and (b) the demonstration of culturally relevant family functioning outcomes (or adaptations) in the face of substantial risks and vulnerabilities. For the Pullman family, Auggie's disability poses a "substantial risk" to the overall balance of familial intimacy, sociability and normalcy.

The Pullman family exemplifies a significant degree of adaptability in their daily lives, modifying routines and expectations to accommodate Auggie's needs and ensuring that he feels both supported and included.



Effective communication is a defining characteristic of their family dynamic, facilitating discussions about Auggie's experiences, fears, and successes, thereby creating an environment in which he feels secure in expressing himself. Additionally, the family enjoys the advantage of having a strong social support system, made up of friends, relatives, and schoolmates, which increases their resilience capacity. Their shared values, centered on kindness, acceptance, and love, guide their actions and decisions, enabling them to maintain a positive outlook even amidst adversity, as evidenced by their commitment to the "Choose Kind" philosophy. The Pullman family employs a variety of coping strategies to manage the stress associated with Auggie's disability, celebrating his achievements and engaging in family activities that reinforce their bond. Throughout the narrative, they emphasize Auggie's strengths and unique attributes rather than solely focusing on his disability, which empowers him and fosters a sense of pride. As the story progresses, the Pullman family undergoes personal and relational growth, acquiring valuable insights into empathy, acceptance, and the significance of mutual support. This growth not only fortifies their familial bond but also increases their ability to confront future challenges collectively.

The Pullmans thus, effectively portray "internal family strengths" that include, according to C.S. Henry and Amanda Harrist, "nurturing and caring; connections to others; establishing and maintaining boundaries, expectations, and integrity; agency and active coping; regulation of self and family; hope, faith, and optimism; meaning-making and a sense of meaning of life; positive views of self and family; and rules and rituals".

Overall, the portrayal of the Pullman family in *Wonder* aligns closely with the fundamentals of family resilience theory, demonstrating the manner in which families can successfully steer across the complexities of disability while cultivating a supportive and nurturing environment.

Role of Educational Institutions in Curbing Prejudices Against Physical Disability

1. Encouraging Inclusive Education

- **Diverse Curriculum:** Schools should use a variety of literature, such as "Wonder" by R.J. Palacio, which has characters with disabilities. Students gain an understanding of and empathy for the experiences of people with impairments due to this exposure.
- **Differentiated Instruction:** For meeting the various needs of individual students, including children with physical disabilities, schools should use differentiated teaching techniques. This method creates a welcoming atmosphere where each student is encouraged and feels appreciated.

2. Fostering Empathy and Understanding

- **Empathy Training:** Educational institutions can put in place initiatives that foster empathy and motivate students to talk about disabilities and the value of kindness. Students can gain a more nuanced understanding of the difficulties faced by their peers with disabilities by participating in role-playing or storytelling exercises.
- **Awareness Campaigns:** Educational establishments ought to plan events and campaigns to raise awareness of the experiences of people with disabilities. These programs may consist of workshops, community service projects, and guest lecturers who encourage tolerance and understanding.



3. Creating Supportive Environments

- **Safe Spaces:** Schools ought to set up areas where they may find space to express their feelings regarding disabilities without worrying about being judged. Support groups and counselling services that accommodate the emotional and psychological needs of specially-abled students are examples of this.
- **Peer Support Programs:** Students with and without disabilities can develop friendships by putting peer mentoring programs into place. These initiatives promote social interaction, assist in dismantling barriers, and lessen preconceptions and misconceptions.

4. Training Educators and Staff

- **Professional Development:** Teachers and staff should receive continual training on disability awareness, inclusive practices, and bias resolution from educational institutions. This training gives teachers the skillset required to address bullying and discrimination within and beyond the four walls of the classroom and foster an inclusive environment.
- **Modelling Inclusive Behaviour:** When interacting with students, educators should set an example of inclusive language and behaviour. Teachers can provide a good example for students to follow by acting with understanding and respect.

5. Encouraging Parental Involvement

- **Involving Families:** Schools ought to aggressively engage parents in conversations regarding inclusion and disabilities. Parents can learn the value of cultivating empathy and acceptance in the home through workshops and informational sessions.
- **Community Partnerships:** Working together with neighbourhood groups that aid individuals with impairments can improve educational initiatives and give families and students access to more resources.

6. Addressing Bullying and Discrimination

- **Unambiguous Policies:** Educational establishments must set up unambiguous anti-bullying guidelines that particularly address prejudice against children with disabilities. These guidelines ought to set out definitive penalties for bullying, and a well-mapped procedure for filing reports and dealing with such situations.
- **Proactive Interventions:** Before prejudices turn into bullying, schools should take proactive steps to recognise and address them. Regular evaluations of student attitudes towards disabilities and the school climate can be part of this.

7. Celebrating Diversity

- **Cultural Competence:** By embracing diversity in all its manifestations, including disability, schools can foster cultural competence. Students can learn about and gain an appreciation for the contributions made by people with disabilities through events like Disability Awareness Month.



- **Showcasing Success Stories:** Telling students about the achievements of people with disabilities can motivate them and dispel stereotypes. A more positive view of disability can be promoted and perceptions can be changed by showcasing accomplishments in a plethora of fields. In conclusion, educational institutions play a significant role in curbing prejudices against physical disabilities by promoting inclusive education, fostering empathy, creating supportive environments, training educators, engaging families, addressing bullying, and celebrating diversity. Using these methods, schools will develop an accepting and understanding environment, eventually creating a more tolerant society.

Conclusion:

Representation, in any form or format, is inevitably political. Representations of impairment in youth literature and media, inform and are informed by complex constellations of politics relating to various aspects of identity formation, social engagement, and dialogues around the body, illness, disability, life, and death. This list is in no way exhaustive; however, these political aspects of children and young adult-oriented literature are inherently concerned with the place of and anxieties about the body in texts and their potential impact on audiences. Discussions of these issues, however, are nonetheless specifically contextualized; the desired effects of such representations shift significantly depending upon the historical and geo-political periods under consideration. So too, it should be assumed that representations reflect and refract the politics of their periods of production and in relation to their implied audiences. While representations of disability in adult-oriented literature, films, and television have been scrutinized, those in children's literature and youth-oriented films and TV shows have not received the same attention.

In conclusion, R.J. Palacio's novel *Wonder* offers a profound exploration of disability through the experiences of Auggie Pullman and the dynamics of his family. The analysis reveals that Auggie's physical appearance and disability significantly influence his psychological development, shaping his self-perception and interactions with peers. His journey illustrates the challenges of navigating a world that often prioritizes superficial judgments over intrinsic worth, highlighting the emotional toll of societal perceptions on individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, the examination of the Pullman family's coping mechanisms through the lens of Family Resilience theory underscores their adaptability and resilience amidst great adversity. The family's ability to communicate openly, access social support, and emphasize shared values fosters a nurturing environment that empowers Auggie and promotes resilience. Ultimately, *Wonder* not only highlights the nuanced intricacies of living with a bodily deformity but also foregrounds the importance of empathy, acceptance, and the transformative power of familial support in overcoming challenges. Through this dual analysis, this paper seeks to highlight how the novel functions as a poignant reminder of the need to be deliberately, joyously, and infectiously kind and understanding in a world that is cruel, hence the promotion of inclusiveness in which people are loved not based on how they look but rather who they are.

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