

**A Child Character's Development in R.J. Palacio's Children's Realistic
Fiction Novel *Wonder***

Rindra Nuriza
English Language and Literature
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia
rindranuriza@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

Besides entertaining, children's literature is expected to stimulate children's understanding about particular values in real life and contributes to their development and needs. Due to this importance, many stories for children are delivered through realistic fiction. This paper thus aimed at investigating a child character's development in realistic fiction and identifying the contributions of focalization to the main character's development by using Bal's narratology (2009) as the main framework. To analyze data in the form of written texts, qualitative method with descriptive analysis was applied. The results showed that the main character developed through four key narrative events and different focalization. Both were examined to explicate the dynamic changes in his personalities and attitudes. The development was also contributed by the six characters' focalization which mostly revealed the shifts of direct and indirect speech, and the cognitive and perceptual views. This means that R.J. Palacio's *Wonder* is successful in portraying a realistic fiction picture of a deformed child. In consequence, it shows that multiple focalization opens horizon to different perspectives which is important in children's literature (Nikolajeva, 2002).

Keywords: *Children's Literature, Character Development, Narratology*

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature teaches values of life to children. Trim (2004, p.27) argues that 'children's literature contributes to social development through its vivid portrayal of beliefs, values and behaviors of society, demonstrated with effect by characters with whom the reader bonds.' In supporting this, Hunt (1999) states, that is how children's literature is good for children—it affects children better or more than non-literature. Therefore, instead of offering the enjoyment, children literature can be used as a site to make them understand and learn about real life since it often portrays the common issues of society through the eyes of children.

At this point, a lot of stories in children's literature depict the possible situations that exist in society through realistic fiction. Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson (1999) define realistic fiction in children's literature as the stories about children that happen to people or animals as it is in the real life; related to the realm of possibility of events that could happen or could have happened. The author creates the protagonists as the invented characters,

but how they act and react are quite like real people or real animals; the events that exist in the story are fictional, but could possibly happen in real life.

In response to contemporary problems in real life that are faced by children, a lot of children's realistic fiction provides complex issues, such as bullying, broken home family, etc, which are probably uncommon in the past. R.J. Palacio's *Wonder* is one of the examples thereof. It tells about a ten-year-old kid who has a facial deformity named August Pullman. He has not gone to public school before, but is supposed to go to mainstream school at the fifth grade. The problems occur when people at his new school are appalled by his look. With a terrible abnormality of his face, August becomes 'different' (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012). Subsequently, he wants to convince people that he is just like other kids. All the bittersweet experiences from his 'new world' teach him a lot to be a strong kid. As the way he views the life changed, his character developed on impact.

In an attempt to investigate the character's development of August, the

present research tries to analyze story's events and specifically conducts focalization that contributes to character's development. Since the story's events are experienced by the character, character becomes the pivotal element in narrative, because it relates to all elements in the story. In fiction, character is a verbal representation of beings—they have the qualities of real people's or animals' personalities (Roberts, 2011). On the other hand, the text or description that ascribes psychological or social traits to a character is called characterization (Jannidis, 2009). By understanding the character and its characterization, the way the character developed can be investigated.

On the other hand, generating narrative events is intended to show the process of character's development. According to Bal (2009, p. 193), narrative event(s) is 'the transition from one state to another state, caused or experienced by actors.' In addition, Culler (1997) states that narratives are the main way to make sense of things, either thinking our lives as a progression that lead us somewhere, or telling us about what is

happening in the world. In this way, narrative can potentially convince us to understand how a character attempts to relate one event to another event through experiences.

Besides, the point of view of character is also important to be investigated, for it supports the narrative events telling the story. The term for this sort of point of view is focalization. It is invented by Gerard Genette (1983; tr. 1988). For Bal (2004), focalization refers to point of view based on the objects perceived by the agent, in this context, the characters. Thus, it is all about the subjects 'who see' and the focalized objects. Shortly, it is the way the readers view the story through the character's eyes and vision. Through focalization, the character development can be identified, since the readers can access the character's consciousness towards the character's thoughts, moods, expressions, words and actions.

METHODOLOGY

This paper applies qualitative research design with descriptive analysis method as the guiding to examine the

data. To clearly describe the data, the description of textual evidences from the novel is arranged by describing cause and effects of selective narrative events through focalization. Furthermore, it also denoted information regarding the kind of relationship between the main character and the others whereby affecting the main character to develop.

In an attempt to answer the research questions, intensive reading concerning related framework was conducted following several sequences which are initiated by reading the whole novel in detail in order to understand major issues of the story and taking memos about it. To collect the data analysis, narrative events that are constituted as the catalyst for changes in the main character, and specific multiple characters' focalization that contribute to the main character's development are highlighted and carefully selected. After that, the collected data are identified by engaging it with the frameworks and previous research that have been elaborated previously. Finally, the data analyzed are

generated into narrative passage by making interpretations to draw the findings, and then discussing the findings to draw the conclusion and gave some suggestions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings show that (1) August's character is developed in two ways: the narrative events and characters' focalization, and (2) the six characters' focalization contributes to August's developing and developed character.

August's character development

The dynamics of August's character can be seen through four key narrative events: pre-going to school, the beginning of being a public-school student, during school's life and the end of school term. Apparently, the events happened before August goes to school give a clear picture that August is insecure.

I would wish that I had a normal face that no one ever noticed at all. I would wish that I could walk down the street without **people seeing me and then doing that look-away thing.** Here's what I think: **the only**

reason I'm not ordinary is that no one else sees me that way.
(p.3)

His insecurity reveals when he focalizes people's reactions which signal that August is bizarre. Consequently, he comes under pressure in convincing people that he is normal. Seemingly, this urge instils lack of self-confidence in August because of having an anomaly. It can be seen from the way of describing himself as 'not ordinary.'

Moreover, the events at the beginning of school term prompt him to be aware of other kids' views.

Jack Will looked at me and put out his hand. When I shook it, he kind of half smiled and said: "Hey," and looked down really fast. "Hey," said Julian, and did the same exact thing as Jack Will: took my hand, forced a smile, looked down fast. Charlotte, she didn't shake my hand but gave me a quick little wave and smiled. (p. 22)

According to the excerpt, the three kids' reactions may also reflect other people's impressions of August at first. The acts seem stiff as if they meet a

weirdo. Although the excerpt does not explicitly show it is August's anomaly that caused the kids act like that, August goes into detail in telling the kids' expressions. It is assumed that August is weird, since the following reactions after looking at August are strained and artificial.

However, after adapting to school, he slowly becomes outgoing to interact with, even spontaneously makes such wry remarks about himself.

"It's because **I think I look like a duck.**" "Oh!" said Mr. Tushman, his eyes opening wide. **He started laughing.** "Really?" "Yeah, I guess," I said, **not quite getting why he thought that was so funny.** (p. 287)

The tone in the excerpt seems ridiculous, because August associates a 'duck' with his face. It indicates that August does not mind anymore to talk about his deformity. Besides, not realizing what he has done is funny implies that he is capable of entertaining people naturally.

In the end, all of August's actions draw attention from people, since August—who is known as

‘extraordinary’ kid—could deal with stressful situations continually. Therefore, the end of school term is the catalyst of August’s character development.

I really couldn’t believe it. I think I was smiling. Maybe I was beaming, I don’t know. **As I walked up the aisle toward the stage, all I saw was a blur of happy bright faces looking at me, and hands clapping for me.** And I heard people yelling things out at me: **“You deserve it, Auggie!” “Good for you, Auggie!”** I saw all my teachers in the aisle seats... were cheering for me, *woo-hooing* and whistling. ... I felt like I was floating. **It was so weird.** (p. 305)

There is a joyous atmosphere when August focalizes the circumstance. It is noticed from people’s reactions that signify appreciation and praise for August. Happy faces and hands clapping describe that the people now support August for the way he is. The words ‘you deserve it Auggie!’ suggest that August wins approval from a lot of people. Furthermore, August himself feels so different in this

graduation day, for it becomes the moment when he gets appreciated for being the real August.

The contributions of characters’ focalization to August’s character development

The focalization in the story comes from six characters: August (the main character), Via (August’s sister), Jack (August’s best friend), Summer (August’s friend), Justin (Via’s boyfriend) and Miranda (Via’s old friend). They are identified from the ways they contribute to August’s developing and developed character by adapting Bal’s notions (1997; 2004; 2009).

August’s developing character

Taking other characters’ focalization into consideration instead of August can depict different views and representation, for example, Via. She could be the one who shows the readers much August’s personalities, since she is already with him over years. In this excerpt, Via describes August’s personality through indirect speech internally.

I’ve always understood that August is special and has special

needs. ... If I wanted Mom and Dad to watch me play soccer, I knew that nine out of ten times they'd miss it because they were busy shuttling August to speech therapy or physical therapy or a new specialist or a surgery. (p. 82)

The use of cognitive process: 'understood' and 'knew' imply that Via understands how hard it is to have such anomaly. The deformity makes the family really take care of August all the time. Conversely, Via realizes how annoyed she feels on being neglected as the parents pay more attention to August than herself, since all of what he is doing really matters to the parents while Via does not. From Via's views, August is a kind of spoiled kid.

While Via more often gives a description about August at home, the focalization from August's close friend at school also needs to be spotlighted, for example, Jack's. Through indirect speech, he portrays August's personality.

That very first day of school I remember seeing August in the cafeteria. **Everybody was looking**

at him. Talking about him. Back then, no one was used to his face or even knew that he was coming to Beecher, so it was a total shocker for a lot of people to see him there on the first day of school. Most kids were even afraid to get near him. ... So when I saw him going into the cafeteria ahead of me, I knew he'd have no one to sit with. (p. 175)

Apparently, Jack narrates the events from the outside. He witnesses other kids' actions in detail as if he knows how they feel when seeing August, with the tone of narrating is full of pity. It comes out from his assumption that the kids are appalled by August. It is assumed that the weird-looking of him makes other kids fear to get close with him, thus it prevents him to make friends. From those actions, it seems that Jack alludes introvert to define August.

At this point, August is always portrayed as deformed, helpless and weird, etc. It is very likely August's character seems to be insecure about his deformity, because of his own and

other characters' perceptions that are presented through focalization.

August's developed character

Gradually discovering the change of August's personalities and attitudes is a kernel to contrast how progressive his character development is. From this point on, the following characters' focalization specifically examine August's developed character.

Besides Jack, Summer also contributes much in describing August's development, particularly at school.

"That means in my next life I won't be stuck with this face." **He pointed to his face when he said that and batted his eyes, which made me laugh. ... He was such a good sport about himself. That's one of the things I like the most about Auggie.** (p. 129)

In the passage, Summer depicts August's sense of humour. Emphasis on the words 'made me laugh,' August is now getting playful. The phrases 'he was such a good sport about himself' implies admirable compliment for August's attitude, for not being serious when talking about his deformity. The last sentence of the excerpt presents a

good impression on August's change. Since his attitude makes Summer laugh, it can be indicated that August's personality is changed in a good way; thereby portraying that August is funny.

Another focalizer who contributes to August's character development is Justin. In the following excerpt, he is an omniscient narrator, because he narrates through the second person's point of view. Being in that way puts him in external focalizer as if he can access other people's mind, since the pronoun 'you' refers unspecified.

I can't sleep tonight. My head is full of thoughts that won't turn off. **I'm supposed to be understanding. Olivia. Auggie.** ... I'm thinking about that a lot and everything it means. **She's right about that. The universe was not kind to Auggie Pullman.** What did that little lid ever do to deserve his sentence? No, no, it's not all random, if it really was all random, the universe would abandon us completely. And the universe doesn't. **It takes care of its most fragile creations**

in ways we can't see. Like with parents who adore you blindly. And a big sister who feels guilty for being human over you. (p. 204)

In essence, Justin lets the readers know how August excites his curiosity about life. His inner monologue is explicitly reported through perceptual verbs: 'supposed to be understanding' and 'am thinking'. Thus, the phrases dispose serious and thoughtful tones. Ultimately, August's deformity engenders Justine's sympathy for making him aware that August is lovable.

By far, all characters' focalization has eventual contributions to August's character development, with indirect speech and thoughts become the most revealed focalization. Seemingly, internal focalization from August comes across clearer, because his motives, opinions, actions, etc are accessible to readers.

On one level, the subsidiary characters' focalization is full of suspicions and assumptions, since it is not allowed to access August's inner thoughts or speech. Hence, the depiction of August's features is

weighed up from partial knowledge. However, it still supports the positioning effects whereby the readers can be objective in observing the progress of August's development through different viewpoints.

A child's character development in R.J. Palacio's *Wonder*

With respect to the issue of the character development, the main character needs to carry out events to get through the story to resolution in accordance with the structure of narrative: a beginning, middle and end (Nikolajeva, 2002 & Thwaites et al, 1994). In consequence, this process expects August to have the ability to change. It is no surprise he becomes round yet dynamic protagonist. The indication comes from the occurrence of a new trait follows through each conflict that goes on and the ways he deals with stressful situations as the events changed.

August's character development is also explicated through his characterisation. For Palmer (2004), when it comes to characterisation in fiction, a character is supposed to have particular traits, interfered by his

individual actions throughout continuing process as what the readers interpret about the character from the first encounter until the end of the story. Suggested by Margolin (as cited in Palmer, 2004, p. 49), the understanding about characters comes into the readers' mind through the acknowledgement of their mental dimensions. It consists of 'cognitive, emotional, volitional, perceptual events, and inner states such as knowledge, belief sets, attitudes, wishes, goals, plans, intentions, and dispositions'. Since the mental dimensions really impact on the way the characters decide to act, they become an important aspect to demystify August's character development.

Moreover, the character's development can be analyzed through inward and outward aspects (Morgan, 2011). Thus, the mental dimensions are in line with the notion of inward aspect, which concern cognitive, perceptual and emotional sides of character. However, it does not mean that the outward aspect is least functional. It is equally important, for it represents the way the character

reacts to particular situation. In line with that, focalization seems appropriate to examine both aspects. It is expected to show the mental dimensions that reflect what the characters do as the follow-up to what August does while he undergoes the development. At the same time, it shows the character's actions and reactions towards narrative events whereby the development takes place.

At this point, characters' focalization contributes to August's character development, in a way, it is able to show other characters' perceptions about him based on what they perceive from August's inward and outward aspects. Through focalization, readers are able to observe the characters' in depth.

The good qualities of children's literature as reflected in R.J. Palacio's children's realistic fiction *Wonder* revisited

Through realistic fiction, August's character development is expected to make children understand about real life. With regard to *Wonder*, the realistic issues implied in which August has to deal with abnormality

present non-didactic values. It can be seen from the way the author portrays August's character. He is not entirely revealed with good personae thereby clarifying that even the protagonist is allowed to have flaws, especially, when dealing with conflicts. For instance, when he struggles with other people's negative judgments, but is able to disabuse them by sharpening the ability to carry out complex problems. In this way, it gives an example of how a child develops character.

In addition, the realistic events containing issue about bullying reflect problems that may occur in today's children's life. McElmeel (1996) articulates that conflicts with realistic manner allow children view the situation from different perspectives. Taking bullying as an example, it often relates to psychical thing, like what Julian does to August. He is bullied by some superior kids, because he is deformed. According to what August does when other kids keep ignoring him, bullying can be faced by deploying strengths over weakness, which is, trying not to be easily upset by people's judgments. In this case, the

character's experience provides different perspectives that enhance the way children deal with the same condition.

Furthermore, the application of multiple focalization also implies realistic quality. It helps children learn to take other people's personal views into consideration and accept that their views may not always right. As it is known that in facing the problems of life, different interpretations cannot be prevented. In supporting this, Benson (2011) argues that the meaning implied in children's story is depended on readers' emotions, personality even their background while reading the texts. As a result, creating different views in a story may develop children's awareness to be more objective and less selfish.

Besides, children are regarded as innocent by adults. Adults think that they are incapable of knowing about the world, so that adults need to teach them what they should know (Hunt, 1999). Therefore, the characters in the story are supposed to be the role-models or statute examples. August can be an example of role model for children. His flaws—emphasis on his

deformed face—make him different from normal kids, but does not prevent him from doing the good things and being himself.

Conversely, adults also believe children need to be protected both from knowledge and experience that literature provides (Nodelman, 2008). He states that adults are obliged to help children know more by providing them the knowledge they should know, yet prevent them from knowing about inappropriate or heavy knowledge, such as violent, politics, so on. Instead of making children better, it also has to keep them the same as they are. In this way, good children's literature tends to be exclusive, yet implicitly didactic.

It is crystal clear that *Wonder* fulfills these qualities. The author gives an example of a good role-model like August, who may be able to motivate children value their life more. The plausible events presented are intelligible, in a way, they stimulate children's mental, social, and psychological development without didactically directs them to assess real life. The issues about bullying that may happen to children nowadays may enhance their sensitivity and tolerance

towards other people whose conditions are different from them. The use of multiple focalization is expected to enlighten children's awareness about any diversity objectively. All features are fictional, but they possibly exist in real life. Hence, children's realistic aspects in *Wonder* give a valid contribution to children's betterment.

CONCLUSION

The findings were quite expected. First, August developed in two ways: narrative events and focalization. Apparently, there are four key narrative events that stimulate August's changes in personalities and traits. They lead the process of August's development. In line with that, focalization helps explicating August's characterisation and ascribing information related August's dynamic changes. Second, the six characters' focalization contributes to August's character development. It presents what the six characters perceive towards August's inner and outer qualities, mostly through indirect speech and shifting focalization whereby their personal views are just accessible to readers.

In conclusion, R.J. Palacio's *Wonder* captures a child's character development in real life, especially for those who are considered 'different.' The novel implies that the development thereof is mainly interfered by physical, social and emotional aspects—how a child reacts to particular situations, deals with problems and resolves the difficulties. To see the attributive aspects, multiple focalization allows discovering the character's changes in personalities and attitudes objectively. That is to say, the application of different perspectives is an essential part of children's literature, in particular, in realistic fiction.

REFERENCES

- Bal, M. (1997). *Narratology: An introduction to the theory of narrative* (2nd ed.). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Bal, M. (2004). Narration and focalization. In Mieke Bal (Ed.), *Narrative theory: Critical concepts in literary and cultural studies*. Canada: Routledge.
- Bal, M. (2009). *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative* (3rd ed.). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Benson, M. (2011). *Finding a crock of gold: Identifying quality in children's literature* (Thesis, Marymount University, United States). Retrieved March 6, 2013 from http://muir.wrlc.org/bitstream/handle/10994/38/Benson_thesis_final.pdf?sequence=1
- Culler, J. (1997). *Literary theory: A very short introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- G  nette, G. (1988). *Narrative discourse revisited* (Lewin, J. E., Trans.). Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. (Original work published 1983).
- Hunt, P. (1999). *Understanding children's literature*. London: Routledge.
- Jannidis, F. (2009). Character. In P. H  nh., J. Pier., W. Schmid., et al (Ed.), *Handbook of narratology* (pp. 14-29). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson. (1999). *Essential of children's literature* (3rd ed.). London: Allyn & Bacon.
- McElmeel, S. (1996). *Educator's companion to children's literature*. Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, Inc.
- Nodelman, P. (2008). *The hidden adults: Defining children's literature*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Nikolajeva, M. (2002). *The rhetoric of character in children's literature*. United States: Scarecrow Press, Inc.
- Palmer, A. (2004). *Fictional minds*. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.
- Roberts, E. V. (2003). *Writing about literature* (9th ed.). New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Thwaites, T., Davis, L., Mules, W. (1994). *Tools for cultural*

studies: An introduction.
Melbourne: Macmillan
Education Australia.

Trim, M. (2004). *Growing and
knowing: A selection guide
children's literature.* München:
K. G. Saur.