

# **Cherishing Individuality vis-à-vis the Ego Centric Child Psychology in R. J. Palacio's *Wonder***

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## **Abstract:**

The story of Augustus Pullman pulls every reader to cherish the warmth that family and friends provide to build him into a competent individual with a confident identity. In the process of building his individuality cum identity, he learns to observe the individuality of his close family members and dear friends. As the entire narrative centres on love in many forms, not only Augustus, but also his loved ones are capable of sculpting their individuality and embracing it. The researcher aims to take a closer look at the process by which Augustus and his sister, Olivia work on their individualities in correspondence with the relationship they share between them as special siblings. In order to carry out a credible unbiased analysis, the researcher opts to employ the Separation-Individuation theory of Margaret S. Mahler to find out how their ego has played a significant role to shape their identities. The findings are unravelled in this research article.

**Keywords:** The Separation-Individuation theory, Child psychology, Ego psychology, Augustus and Olivia.

Children's literature, in English literature's timeline, has offered many adventurous tales, magical tales, fairy tales, mythologised tales, animal fables and wise parables. All these depictions focus mainly on ordinary children whose imagination runs wild because of sophisticated lifestyle and appealing health. Readers are made to expect fictitious characters who play perfect roles. They are compelled to find beautiful princesses, ugly old hags, handsome and adventure loving heroes, kind, compassionate, and communicative pet animals, loving parents and grandparents and what not. This perspective has pushed people

with imperfections such as the physically challenged children, children with special needs and the sick children to the periphery.

With the improvisation and expansion of the twenty-first century, literature feels warm and humble to include the narratives of the sick people and narratives concerning the sick people into a special consideration under a category called sick literature. *The Spare Room* of Helen Garner and *Tuesdays with Morrie* of Mitch Albom belong to the sub-genre of sick literature and are prescribed even in colleges nowadays. Thus, this side-lined sector has their voices heard and recorded in fiction these days. However, these novels feature adult characters. John Green's rendering of *The Fault in Our Stars* portrays teenage characters. Making an exception by portraying a child in sick literature, the author R. J. Palacio has written a novel named *Wonder*, which was published in 2012 by Alfred A. Knopf publishers. A movie of the same name was released in 2017. The fame of the story precedes its sales rate making it one of the bestsellers in the United States and abroad. The novel has received many prestigious awards including Mark Twain Award.

R. J. Palacio is an American author, who was inspired to write this story because her son once started to cry on seeing a girl with a severely deformed face. This deeply impacted her and she wanted to delineate a lesson on how to handle and respect people with deformity. This novel revolves around a child protagonist and so, it belongs to children's fiction as well. Since its publication, the words, "You can't blend in... when you were born to stand out" (Palacio Cover page) stand to inspire a lot of readers.

The novel is structurally divided into eight parts. Each part is presented from first person point of view. Parts one, six, and eight are allotted to the protagonist, Augustus Pullman, who is fondly known as Auggie in the narrative. Part two belongs to his elder sister Olivia, who is identified as Via. Part three is taken by Summer, Auggie's friend. Part four

belongs to Jack, Auggie's best friend. Part five is taken by Justin, Via's boyfriend. He also offers an unbiased observation of the lives of the other characters around him. Part seven is given to Miranda, Via's close friend. The story of *Wonder* follows in a nutshell to enhance the readers relate the proposed theory with the relevant incidents.

Auggie is a ten-year-old kid, who has undergone twenty-seven surgeries. These surgeries could not cure him enough and has left him with a deformed face. His health condition compels him to be home schooled till he hits ten. His mom wants him to have a normal life and she insists that it begins with school. His dad is not sure of the decision, but he cannot dissuade his wife from this decision. As Auggie is to go to school, he is encouraged by his sister and mom. Further, he is introduced to his classmates Jack, Julian, and Charlotte before school begins in order to get acquaintances. These kids feel awkward at first, but get along with him in a few days once school begins. Julian bullies Auggie and Jack stands by his side. As days go on, Summer befriends Auggie when Auggie avoids Jack because of over hearing his contempt for him on Halloween.

Along with his life, his sister's life is very much entangled. Via, who is a very close to Miranda is avoided by her when the school reopens. At home, she sees her brother taking limelight as a first-time schooler. She feels depressed and lonely. She meets Justin at a fine arts class and they become friends. Justin understands Via better just like her grandmother. As to Via, only her granny and Justin care about her existence. She assumes that her parents spend a lot of time with Auggie, because of his poor health condition and therefore, she often feels neglected from the family. Miranda, on the other hand, wishes to have a brother like Auggie in order to get sympathy and attention. She tries replacing Via by imitating her during the holidays and becomes a very different person. Once returning to school, she feels guilty to face Via for her behaviour and avoids her and her company. Her talks with Auggie make her feel loved and accepted in the Pullman family. Moreover, the divorce of her parents over

trifle things makes her harbour hatred and contempt towards her parents as they have deprived her of a happy home.

Auggie impresses everyone in the science fair and Jack apologises to Auggie for his betrayal through virtual games and mails. He feels dejected when he misunderstands that Via is ashamed of him. Furthermore, his pet dog Daisy is also euthanized due to sickness. He learns that Via, Justin and Miranda are to perform in a play where Miranda and Justin play the main roles. Once the strain between Via and him is set right, he wishes to see the play with his parents. Seeing Auggie in the audience, Miranda feigns sickness and allows Via to take her part and perform and feels glad and proud of her act. This reunites two best friends. The Pullman family celebrates the night cheerfully with Miranda.

Auggie goes out to camp with the other grade kids. While trying to find a spot to urinate, he is bullied by a few rebellious seventh graders. Jack, as usual, along with a few other kids, chase the big boys away. Auggie gets hurt in the feud, still manages well and is glad about how his classmates team up to protect him. At the graduation day, Auggie is awarded the Henry Ward Beecher Award for his strength and kindness. On his way back home, he thanks his mom for this wonderful opportunity to explore the world by sending him to school and she in turn thanks him for being such a wonder in their lives.

The novelist has employed universal themes like love and support of the family and friends during thick and thin, the difficulty of showing kindness, bullying schools, presence of status in schools, identity formation and establishment, becoming independent while growing up, prudent parenting and proper guidance in shaping their lives. In all, it is the love of the Pullman couple that knits the lives of their kids as well as their friends together and makes the narrative a wonder.

Taking a step closer to study the characters from psychology's perspective, the researcher has chosen Margaret Mahler (1897-1985), an American psychiatrist for her seminal theory, "Separation-Individuation Theory of Child Development". As per the research conducted by Margaret and her team, they conclude that separation-individuation is a process that happens in the first three years of a child's life. It is during this phase that the child starts to identify and recognise itself as an individual and learns to shape its own identity and individuality. This theory situates itself between Sigmund Freud's psychosexual stages of development theory and Erik Erikson's psychosocial stages of development theory. Thus, it bridges the gap and informs one of the important steps in the process of building ego centric individuality.

Based on this theory, there are three stages of development namely, normal autistic stage (0-1 month), normal symbiotic stage (1-5 months), and separation-individuation stage (5-24 months). The last stage has four sub-stages. They are differentiation/hatching, practicing, rapprochement, and object constancy. In the first two stages, the infant sees itself and the mother as a single entity as the mother takes care of its essential needs. In the third stage, the infant comes to realize that the mother and it are two different individuals. This realisation is reached with activities like crawling, walking, petty falls and accidents, tantrums, clinging and shunning behaviours. In the end, the child is observed to have internalised the mother's mental model in guiding the super ego in living out as an individual separated from its mother.

It is based on the following statement that the researcher aims to study the Pullman siblings, Auggie and Via. "According to Mahler, it is the ability to integrate frustrating and pleasurable aspects of experience with another person that leads to a stable sense of self that can tolerate fluctuating emotional states within the self and with others. The inability to

integrate these aspects of experience can lead to psychopathology (Mahler, Pine, and Bergman 1975).” (Encyclopedia 1).

It is proper to begin this ego centric psychoanalysis with Auggie as he is the protagonist of the narrative. He is the wonder that the title alludes to. Auggie’s voice overshadows the other character who speak their part and that astonishingly marks the successful process of realising his individuality over dependency. The dedication page foreshadows his voice,

*Doctors have come from distant cities  
just to see me  
stand over my bed*

*disbelieving what they're seeing*

*They say I must be one of the wonders  
of god's own creation  
and as far as they can see they can offer no explanation*

—NATALIE MERCHANT, "Wonder" (Palacio Dedication page)

In spite of being the protagonist of the novel, Auggie is not a normal ten-year-old kid. His physical deformities define him. His mother has taken great care to home school him to provide him with knowledge. His health condition has forced him to look up to her as his own. She can read his face and mind at the same time. She is his beacon of light and his extended self or rather, he assumes thus so till he is given with an option of going to school. His deformity demands his mom’s extra attention all the time. The idea of school scares him and he refuses to give it a try. The conversation between Auggie and his mom can be cited as examples for stichomythia and it represents their aligned wavelength of thought.

The following exchange happens right after first day of school and his response surprises his mom for the better.

The first thing she said after hugging me was: " So, how was it? One to ten?"

"Five," I said, shrugging, which I could tell totally surprised her.

"Wow," she said quietly, "that's even better than I hoped for." (Palacio 46)

After going to school, he feels home sick. His mom tries to encourage him not to give up and only then, facing the world alone for the first time, he realises the fact that he and his mom are two different persons with two different lives to live. This kindles his curiosity and he feels overwhelmed to take one step at a time. He befriends Jack and Summer and gets comfortable meeting people who wish to look at his heart and mind behind his scarred face.

Even though the story covers only a year of Auggie's life with relatable flashbacks, it is wonderful to see him emerging out of dependency and securely making his way independently. His nervous first day at school, his first harsh experience at Halloween without his mom by his side, the reconciliation that leads to healing of friendship between Jack and him and the fight that he gets involved at the camp site, empowers his ego all the more. As mentioned earlier, he is the wonder that the title symbolically refers to and that reference is made by his mom as the novel ends. Her confession, "You really are a wonder, Auggie. You are a wonder." (Palacio 213) highlights his successful separation from her and living his life to the fullest of its destiny under the guidance of his super ego. His separation from his mom has earned him his individuality.

Via or Olivia is the opposite of Auggie. She is elder to him, but before his entry, she has enjoyed the undivided love her of mom and dad. This happiness is short lived as they welcome Auggie when she is six years old. Auggie's sickness needed his parents' continuous care and she was left to take care of herself. She was matured enough for her age for she was

compassionate towards her younger brother. As days went by, she noticed that she was not the centre of anybody's life. Auggie soon replaced Via and that made her feel dejected, lonely, and neglected as a member in the family. She begins her narration with a Biblical allusion where she alludes herself with Joseph from the Book of Genesis thus, "August is the Sun. Me and Mom and Dad are planets orbiting the Sun. The rest of our family and friends are asteroids and comets floating around the planets orbiting the Sun." (Palacio 63).

She turns to her grandmother for emotional appreciation and she finds herself immersed in the love of her grandmother. She remembers her granny as, "... was one of those grandmothers who do everything with their grandkids." (Palacio 65). At school, she finds her consolations and affection reciprocated in Miranda. When their friendship strains, she feels bitter and stays aloof. Just then, Justin takes her attention and he sees through her and helps her understand her situations and family better and brings healing in her life.

In spite of having developed her individuality during her childhood, Via is affected by the separation that she faces from her parents since Auggie's birth. This separation affects her negatively and she acquires low self-confidence, inferiority complex and depression. In her perception of things and words, "Mom and Dad would always say I was the most understanding little girl in the world. I don't know about that, just that I understood there was no point in complaining" (Palacio 63-64). She regains her individuality when she realises that her parents love her. Justin's entry in her life at the most miserable time also plays a significant role as he provides her a chance to take a counter perspective on life. Miranda and Via's reunion strengthens her identity even more.

In conclusion, Via and Auggie are raised in a loving family. Via lives with the sense of separation all her life only to explore her individuality with the advent of Justin and Miranda's contribution. Similarly, Auggie, who is cosy in his mom's company, expects to live his life as her extension. When she pushes him to explore his life on his own, he feels



nervous in the beginning fearful of the supposed separation from his mom. To his surprise, after handling a couple of crises on his own, he realises his ego strengthening. Henry Beecher Award is a symbol that appreciates his success in his journey of self-exploration. Thus, separation, however bad or bitter it might sound, often offers the path to creating one's individuality. Margaret Mahler's theory works not only in normal children, but also in children who are sick and whose identities are as vulnerable as their bodies and minds. However, the time it takes in these kids is considerably long, but the process always ends with establishing their individuality.

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