



The Consequences of Altruistic Behavior in Picture Books

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Abstract: Altruism is commonly presented in children's literature as a fundamental moral virtue that encourages kindness, empathy, and prosocial behavior. This study examines the consequences of altruistic behavior in three selected picture books: *Little Miss Mary and the Big Monster Makeover* by G. G. Toropov and Cleone Cassidy (2008), *Harold Loves His Woolly Hat* by Vern Kousky (2018), and *My Brother's Wheeeeeelchair* by Salil Chaturvedi (2019). Employing a qualitative interpretative research design, this study conducts close textual and visual analysis to explore how altruistic behavior is constructed and how its consequences are represented within narrative and illustrative elements. The findings reveal that altruistic behavior in these picture books generates complex outcomes, including emotional vulnerability, identity negotiation, and sustained social responsibility. While altruistic actions promote empathy, acceptance, and inclusion, they also expose characters to emotional risk, personal sacrifice, and moral obligation. This study contributes to children's literature scholarship by offering a critical perspective on moral representation and emphasizing the importance of acknowledging the emotional dimensions of altruistic behavior in narratives for young readers.

Keywords: altruistics behavior, consequences, picture books

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature has long been regarded as a significant medium for the transmission of moral values, cultural norms, and social expectations. Literature helps us identify and examine fragments of experience, and literature helps us see the meaning and unity of life (Lukens, 2003, p.6). Through stories that depict interpersonal relationships and ethical dilemmas, children are introduced to ways of understanding right and wrong, empathy and responsibility, and the self in relation to others. Among the moral values frequently emphasized in children's texts, altruism occupies a central position. Picture books, in particular, play a crucial role in this process because they represent one of the earliest literary forms

encountered by children and combine verbal narratives with visual storytelling to convey moral meaning.

Altruism in children's picture books is typically framed as an unequivocal moral virtue. Characters who demonstrate altruistic behavior are often rewarded with social acceptance, personal happiness, or narrative resolution. Children's literature that is exclusively written for children rests on three criteria (Oby, 2010, p.3): (1) whether the heroes are children or teenagers, (2) whether the themes, that is, the ideas, relationships, and (3) language, are simple or complex. Numerous studies have shown that exposure to altruistic narratives can support children's emotional development and encourage positive social interaction. Recent developments in children's literature suggest a gradual shift toward more complex and realistic portrayals of moral behavior. Contemporary picture books increasingly depict characters who must navigate emotional uncertainty, social responsibility, and personal sacrifice when helping others.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining the consequences of altruism in three selected picture books: *Little Miss Mary and the Big Monster Makeover*, *Harold Loves His Woolly Hat*, and *My Brother's Wheeeeeelchair*. These texts were selected because they present diverse contexts of altruism, including transformation, acceptance of difference, and caregiving within family relationships. By focusing on both textual and visual elements, this study explores how altruistic actions affect characters emotionally and socially. The research aims to contribute to children's literature studies by offering a nuanced understanding of altruism as a complex ethical practice rather than a simplistic moral ideal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Altruism as a Moral Concept

Altruism has been widely discussed in moral philosophy and psychology as behavior motivated by concern for the welfare of others. Psychological theories, particularly the empathy–altruism hypothesis, suggest that altruistic actions arise from empathic concern rather than self-interest. Altruistic behavior is defined as one of self-sacrifice by doing some list of voluntary actions until in the end, benefiting other people (Li, Kirkman, and Porter, 2014). In educational contexts, altruism is often associated with moral development, empathy building, and social responsibility. These perspectives have significantly influenced how altruism is represented and interpreted in children's literature. Ricard (2015) also described that altruism requires motivation: an instinctive reflex or automatic behavior cannot be qualified as either altruistic or selfish, whatever the beneficial or harmful consequences. Furthermore, Ricard (2015) also explained that altruism could even lead to personal benefits, provided those benefits do not constitute the ultimate goal of our behavior but are only secondary consequences of it.

Within literary studies, altruism is frequently examined as part of moral didacticism. Furthermore, (Griskevicius et al., 2010) stated that it turns out that this

behavior is also very close to the possibility of a new higher social status and also various other benefits in the future. Children's texts are often understood as tools for teaching ethical behavior, and altruistic characters are positioned as moral exemplars. While such representations serve pedagogical purposes, critics argue that they may oversimplify moral experience by presenting altruism as universally positive and emotionally uncomplicated.

Moral Representation in Children Literature

Scholars have long recognized that children's literature plays a vital role in shaping moral imagination. Narrative engagement allows children to explore ethical situations through identification with characters and reflection on narrative outcomes. According to Lynch-Brown, Tomlinson, & Short (2014), personal fulfillment could be achieved by the children, even more than that, it also will lead to children's academic achievement. The imagination and narration in the storybooks read by children will be well stimulated also from a visual standpoint for children, for their personal fulfillment. Research has shown that stories can foster empathy and moral reasoning by encouraging readers to consider multiple perspectives.

However, much of the existing scholarship focuses on moral outcomes rather than moral processes. That is, studies often examine whether characters act morally, rather than how moral actions affect them emotionally or socially. This focus limits our understanding of moral complexity in children's literature.

Recent scholarship has begun to emphasize ethical ambiguity and emotional realism. Researchers argue that contemporary children's texts increasingly challenge binary distinctions between right and wrong and instead present moral dilemmas that require reflection and negotiation. Nevertheless, detailed qualitative analyses of altruism and its consequences in picture books remain limited. Retnowati, Salim, & Saleh (2018) stated that reading picture books is effective to increase the kindness of children. So, the narrative elements in the picture book must contain meanings that support children's development.

Picture Books as Multimodal Texts

Picture books are inherently multimodal, combining written language with visual imagery to construct meaning. Picture books can be the most popular genre in children's literature (Junaid, 2017, p.112). Visual elements such as color, composition, perspective, and facial expression play a crucial role in shaping emotional interpretation and moral positioning. Scholars argue that illustrations often communicate implicit meanings that are not explicitly stated in the text. The picture book has only a small amount of text as cited by Anderson (2006) that a picture book conveys its message in a small amount of text or none at all.

Multimodal analysis is therefore essential for understanding how moral values are represented in picture books. The picture illustration and text can explain and complete each other to give an example of a kindness act that wants to be told (Al-Somadi, 2012, as cited Retnowati, G., Salim, R. M. A., & Saleh, A. Y. 2018). For example, altruistic behavior in the picture book is expected to be depicted with soft colors, texture, and shapes that describe friendly expressions and gestures so that an image of kindness appears. Through visual storytelling, picture books can depict emotional vulnerability, tension, and responsibility in subtle ways. Despite this potential, many studies focus primarily on textual analysis, neglecting the interpretative value of images. According to Strouse et al. (2018), children's ability to transfer knowledge from picture books to the real world may be constrained by developments in their symbolic understanding, analogical reasoning, and their understanding of fantasy and reality. This review indicates that what is represented through illustrative elements such as color, shape, texture, or line can affect a child's ability to recognize and pronounce information in a book so that it affects children's habits.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative interpretative research design to analyze the representation and consequences of altruism in selected picture books. Qualitative literary analysis is appropriate because it allows for in-depth interpretation of narrative structure, character development, and visual symbolism.

Data Collection

Data were collected through repeated close readings of both text and illustrations. The primary data consist of three picture books:

- a. *Little Miss Mary and the Big Monster Makeover* (2008)
- b. *Harold Loves His Woolly Hat* (2018)
- c. *My Brother's Wheeeelchair* (2019)

The selection criteria included the centrality of altruism to the narrative, diversity of social contexts, and the importance of visual storytelling.

All of these data are classified into positive and negative consequences based on the theory of altruism by Ricard (2015). The researchers use narrative and illustrative elements to connect altruistic behavior in books with the effect that arises. Narrative episodes involving altruistic actions were identified, along with visual cues that conveyed emotional and social consequences.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed as the primary analytical technique to identify recurring patterns related to altruistic behavior and its consequences within the selected picture books. The analysis was conducted through several systematic stages. First, the textual narratives and visual elements were read and observed repeatedly to achieve data familiarization. Second, initial codes were generated by

identifying key actions, emotional responses, and social interactions associated with altruistic behavior. These codes were then grouped into broader categories representing emotional consequences, identity negotiation, and social responsibility. In the final stage, the emergent themes were interpreted through the theoretical framework of altruism, moral representation, and multimodal analysis, enabling an operational application of theory in reading both textual and visual data and ensuring analytical coherence across findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The result explains how the consequences of altruistic behavior are depicted in the three selected picture books. The resulting consequences can be positive or negative. Ben-Ner, A & Hu, F. (2017, p.2) emphasized that altruism has an essential role in creating cooperation between individuals in various fields; as the antithesis, altruism also has a wrong side and has the potential to create conflict between individuals because altruistic feelings often limited only to their group so that it is detrimental to people outside the group.

There always be consequences and attainment emerges from every behavior we have. This happened to the characters that have altruistic behavior. The altruistic actions in *Little Miss Mary and The Big Monster Makeover* by G.G Toropov and Cleone Cassidy (2008), *Harold Loves His Woolly Hat* by Vern Kousky (2018), and *My Brother's Wheeeelchair* by Salil Chaturvedi (2017) have consequences for the characters who do the altruistic behavior, and all of them will be revealed and strengthened by a citation from the picture book.

Little Miss Mary And The Big Monster Makeover By G.G Toropov And Cleone Cassidy (2008)

In *Little Miss Mary and The Big Monster Makeover* (2018), one of the characteristics of altruistic behavior is the feeling of optimism in every action they act or do. Little Mary is really optimistic that some of her Dad's outfits fit the monster's body. She grabbed the tuxedo, shoes, and also the shirt for the monster. In fact, when she is too optimistic then the result is failure, this individual tried to think about another action and forgiveness to their selves in facing the failure of the result.



Figure 1
Little Mary gave the Monster her Dad's Outfit

There can also be a consequence of individuals that often think of optimism in their life. When they are faced with optimism that the action can run well but the reality is failed, they can be frustrated or have big regret on that. Being a positive person is always thinking optimistically that's a good point, but when they are faced with the opposite result, they need to learn about forgiveness.

Meanwhile, the other consequence of having altruistic behavior in this book is about giving what we love in resulting happiness for themselves. 'She furnished the Monster with J.P. Tod's shoes, A Ralph Lauren shirt, then proceeded to choose a stunning tuxedo from Louis Vuitton and with bated breath waited, as he put it on (Toropov and Cassidy, 2008, p.5). This line shows that Mary voluntarily gives her valuables to the monster, and Mary feels pleasure after dressing the monster.

The monster feels blessed when he tells the story of Mary's makeover service to his friend and they believe. The consequence of giving a donation because it can satisfy something is good but we need to be aware of someone to be used of our kindness to others.



Figure 2
The monster invited all of his friends

The monster invites all of his friends to come to Mary's closet to do the makeover. Even so, Mary doesn't mind because she feels happy when she does kindness, and she has found her passion. This book shows that altruistic behavior can bring good consequences; Mary found that fashion styling is her passion.

Harold Loves His Woolly Hat By Vern Kousky (2018)

The second book is *Harold Loves His Woolly Hat* by Vern Kousky (2018). This book tells a story about Harold who behaves altruistically. The consequences of Harold's altruistic behavior will be revealed and strengthened by the citation from the picture book. 'Then one day, a crow swoops down and steals Harold's woolly hat.' (Kousky, 2018, p.6). The lines imply that the woolly hat belongs to Harold and he has the right to get back his woolly hat without anything in exchange. In 2001, Batson stated that motivation to be altruistic, the well-being of others must constitute a goal in itself. Harold's goal is to get back his woolly hat, however, as time goes by it becomes his habit to behave altruistically. It is related to Ricard's statement that the person who feels compassion and kindness can develop the strength of mind and desire to come to the aid of the other (2015, p.65). Anderson (2003) also argues that model, positive emotions (kindness, other-regarding love, compassion, etc.) enhance health by virtue of pushing aside negative ones.

Harold climbs up the tree once the crow flies away, he discovers that the baby crows sleep on it and he decided not to take his woolly hat. Harold's actions prove how altruistic acts lead someone to develop empathy toward others. Ricard (2015, p.87) presumed that true altruism goes naturally hand-in-hand with profound personal satisfaction. Not only give up on his woolly hat, but Harold also helps the crow by bings, honey, to feed the baby crows. Harold used to think that he is just an ordinary bear without his woolly hat. However, when he discovers his hat can be useful for others, he is satisfied.



Figure 3
Harold tries to make another trade by offering blueberries.



Figure 4

Harold keeps trying to make a trade with the crow by offering shiny things.

It can be concluded that altruistic behaviors give positive impacts. Altruistic behaviors will help mankind to maintain a relationship with others and treat other people better.

My Brother's Wheeeeeelchair By Salil Chaturvedi (2019)

The last book is *My Brother's Wheeeeeelchair* by Salil Chaturvedi (2019). This book is about Dhurbo and Durva, who love to do goodness. Durva almost always accompanies Dhurbo in every activity.



Figure 5

Durbo and Durva love to play together

‘Everyone who sees us, says we make a crazy pair’ (Chaturvedi, 2019, p.3). This line implies that Dhurbo and Durva are always together, and it makes them

happy. A natural form of altruism gives happiness and warmth to both the giver and the recipient. Ricard (2015, p.87) argues that natural altruism appears naturally to provide warmth and personal satisfaction. It is fine to feel happy and personally satisfied when engaging in altruistic behavior as long as we do not take advantage of others. Fryburg (2021, p.90) explains that kindness creates positive relationships between individuals and can reduce stress. According to Jasielska (2018, p.5), kindness strengthens happiness because it increases the trust of others. This good consequence happened to Durva and Dhurbo, who became happier after sharing the goodness. Altruistic love, in this case, compassion, is the motivation for Dhurbo's behavior. He imagines his sister will suffer if the shoes he wears to school get wet. In his research, Klimecki, O. M. et al. (2014, p.877) revealed that when you feel altruistic love and compassion, negative emotions in your body turn into positive emotions.

According to Ricard, (2015) appreciating and paying attention to the condition of others is an important component of altruism that will lead to virtue so that there is a desire to care for others. When his friends wanted to try Dhurbo's wheelchair, he did not mind and had fun with them. Dhurbo did not consider the risks that would occur to him, such as damage to the wheelchair. Just like when he let his sister ride his wheelchair, altruistic love and compassion appeared in Dhurbo when his friends used his wheelchair for fun. It proves Ricard's (2015) finding that altruistic love and compassion are impartial. Consequently, Dhurbo received reciprocity altruism from his friends, and they made a ramp in front of their house to make it easier for Dhurbo in his wheelchair when he visits. Ricard (2015) argues that everyone who receives kindness will do the same thing out of gratitude, and when they do not give back, the consequence is being ostracized by the group.



Figure 6
Durbo's Friend made a ramp for him

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that altruism in children's picture books is represented as a complex ethical practice with multifaceted consequences. Through qualitative multimodal analysis of three selected texts, the research reveals that altruistic behavior involves emotional vulnerability, identity negotiation, and sustained social responsibility.

By focusing on consequences rather than intentions, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of moral representation in children's literature. Picture books emerge not only as tools for moral instruction but also as spaces for engaging young readers with the emotional realities of ethical action.

After analyzing the three picture books, *Little Miss Mary and The Big Monster Makeover* by G.G Toropov and Cleone Cassidy (2008), *Harold Loves His Woolly Hat* by Vern Kousky (2018), and *My Brother's Wheeeelchair* by Salil Chaturvedi (2019), researchers find the consequences that arise from altruistic behavior that by the characters in the books. Effects can be either positive or negative. However, the results of the research on the data that the researcher collected from the illustrative and narrative elements of the three selected picture books show that altruistic behavior in the three books has positive consequences. Similar consequences arise in the three picture books that the pleasure philanthropic actors get after doing good to others. Mary, the character in *Little Miss Mary and The Big Monster Makeover* by G.G Toropov and Cleone Cassidy (2018), finds her passion in fashion styling after voluntarily dressing monsters. He is happy even though he has to sacrifice his valuables. The positive consequence received by Harold in *Harold Loves His Woolly Hat* by Vern Kousky (2018), Harold gets new friends. After he gives up his favorite woolen hat to be used by the crow's children, he gains friendship with the crow due to his kindness. Dhurbo, the character from the book *My Brother's Wheeeelchair* by Salil Chaturvedi (2019), gets praise for his heart even though he doesn't expect it.

Additionally, Dhurbo receives reciprocity altruism from his friends as a form of reciprocity for his good behavior. He let his friends ride in his wheelchair, and then his friends built a ramp at their house so Dhurbo and his wheelchair could visit easily. The three selected picture books prove that the perpetrators of altruism will receive consequences for their actions, in this case, positive consequences.

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