

An Analysis of Moral Values and Character Education Depicted in The Film Wonder

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Abstract

The title of this research is An Analysis of Moral Values and Character Education Depicted in the Film Wonder. This research addresses the issue of declining moral values among youth, as reflected in the increasing prevalence of bullying and intolerance in educational settings. The aims of this research is to examine how the 2017 film *Wonder* can be utilized as a medium for teaching moral values and character education. Specifically, the study investigates how selected scenes, character dialogues, and interactions portray ethical principles and personal virtues. Descriptive qualitative method and content analysis is used as a research method, the data were categorized and interpreted through Eyre's framework which outlines eleven core moral values and Lickona's theory of character education, which emphasizes the development of virtues such as empathy, courage, and respect in formal learning contexts. Data were collected by analyzing the film's script and narrative structure, identifying key moments where moral and character values were evident. The analysis reveals that *Wonder* frequently portrays values such as respect, self-confidence, and love, with empathy emerging as the most dominant character trait. These findings suggest that films like *Wonder* can be effectively integrated into classroom instruction to foster moral reasoning, empathy, and emotional intelligence, thus supporting the development of ethically aware and socially responsible learners.

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INTRODUCTION

English language instruction in Indonesia spans all educational levels, from kindergarten through university, systematically developing core competencies in listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Within the reading curriculum, narrative texts form a significant component (Laila et al., 2023; Maya & Iskandar, 2022; Qatrinada & Apoko, 2024). These stories are not merely linguistic exercises; they inherently carry and explicitly impart moral values such as honesty, courage, perseverance, kindness, respect, justice, responsibility, and the consequences of choices, serving as a deliberate vehicle for character education alongside language acquisition. Despite this structured integration of ethical lessons into the curriculum through literature, disconcerting trends indicate a pervasive moral decline among the younger generation. Moral decline among young generations has become a global concern, particularly visible in school environments through increased bullying, intolerance, and disrespectful behavior. In Indonesia, despite strong cultural and religious foundations such as Pancasila, the disconnect between national values and students' daily conduct continues to grow. National surveys have highlighted worrying trends: for instance, a 2008 study by Plan Indonesia and SEJIWA revealed that 67.9% of high school students had experienced violence, and bullying complaints recorded by the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) made up 25% of

education-related cases between 2011–2014 (Wibowo et al., 2021). These findings illustrate an urgent need to address moral education more effectively in schools.

Character education plays a vital role in shaping ethically grounded and socially responsible individuals (Azi et al., 2022; Sembiring et al., 2021). As (Lickona, 1991) emphasizes, instilling values such as honesty, empathy, and courage is essential to help students navigate moral dilemmas in real life. (Eyre, 1993) further defines moral values as universal principles such as love, respect, and justice that guide behavior and promote harmonious interaction. When character education is effectively implemented, it not only fosters personal development but also strengthens national identity and civic responsibility (Sulayani et al., 2021). However, despite government efforts, these values are often inadequately translated into classroom practices, leaving students with a shallow understanding of morality.

In response to this challenge, educators have explored alternative and more engaging mediums for delivering value-based education. One such medium is film, which serves as both an accessible and emotionally resonant tool. Films can depict complex moral choices and character development through relatable narratives, making them powerful supplements to conventional teaching (Purba et al., 2022). Research has shown that audiovisual storytelling enhances student empathy and facilitates critical reflection on ethical issues (Imam Tabroni et al., 2021). This approach is particularly relevant to today's media-savvy generation, who are more receptive to lessons delivered through popular culture.

Despite increasing interest in media-based pedagogy, few studies have simultaneously explored moral values and character education frameworks within a single film. Previous studies, such as (Nadeak et al., 2020), (Kusramadhani et al., 2022) and (Apriliana, 2022), have analysed moral values in folktales entitled *Tongkat Tunggal Panaluan*, Moral Values in English Textbook: 'When English Rings a Bell' and films such as *Imperfect*, while (Brilianti, 2023) examined The Representation of Character Education in the Movie *Sang Prawira* Based using Lickona's framework. Previous research tends to focus on either one of these aspects, with limited integration of theoretical perspectives such as Eyre's and Lickona's. Moreover, there is a lack of contextually grounded analysis that connects these values to Indonesia's educational needs. This study addresses that gap by analyzing the 2017 film *Wonder*, which presents a narrative rich in ethical content and character development, making it a suitable model for moral education in schools.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze the representation of moral values and character education in *Wonder* using Eyre's (1993) framework of moral values and Lickona's (1991) character education theory. By identifying how these values are conveyed through dialogue, plot, and character behavior, this research aims to offer insights for educators on how films can be utilized as effective pedagogical tools for promoting empathy, ethical awareness, and moral reasoning in the classroom.

METHOD

Research Design

This research employed a qualitative descriptive design aimed at objectively analyzing the portrayal of moral values and character education in the film *Wonder*. The qualitative approach allowed for in-depth interpretation of dialogue, behavior, and narrative structure. The study focused on capturing how values were expressed through characters and plotlines using content analysis as the main technique (Cresswell, 2013; Bone, 2019; Renette et al., 2021).

The primary data source was the 2017 film *Wonder*, written by Jack Thorne, Steve Conrad, and Stephen Chbosky, adapted from the novel by R. J. Palacio. Both the film and its official screenplay served as the main materials for analysis, as they provide rich representations of interpersonal interactions and moral messages suitable for character education research.

The instrument used was documentation, including film viewing and script analysis. This instrument was considered appropriate because it enabled systematic observation of narrative elements: dialogue, character behavior, and scenes that reflect values. Through documentation, researchers could repeatedly examine the same content for consistency and accuracy, enhancing the reliability of interpretation (John Creswell, 2013).

Data Collection

The data collection process consisted of the following steps: 1) Selected the film *Wonder* as the object of study; 2) Collected supporting literature and theories on moral values and character education; 3) Viewed the film several times to understand context and character development; 4) Downloaded and reviewed the full dialogue script; 5) Identified and marked scenes and dialogue reflecting moral values and character traits; 6) Categorized the identified content using frameworks by Eyre (1993) and Lickona (1991); and 7) Organized the findings into a documentation sheet with scene timestamps, value categories, and descriptions.

Data Analysis Technique

The data were analyzed using content analysis, focusing on the classification and interpretation of scenes and dialogues. The analytical process followed the model by (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which consists of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The frameworks of Eyre (1993), which outlines eleven universal moral values (e.g., honesty, respect, kindness), and Lickona (1991), which highlights seven essential character traits (e.g., empathy, courage, cooperation), served as coding categories for analysis.

RESULT

The analysis was conducted using a content analysis approach on relevant dialogues and scenes, which were then classified thematically based on social contexts, namely school, family, and public spaces. The thematic presentation of findings aims to highlight how moral values and character education emerge in various forms of interaction and conflict situations in different environments. This thematic organization not only enhances clarity and reduces repetition but also facilitates a deeper interpretation of the moral dynamics in the film.

School-Based Contexts: Peer Conflict and Bullying

Most of the moral values in *Wonder* appear in school settings, particularly involving peer interaction and bullying. Respect is one of the most frequently depicted values. For instance, in the scene where Jack Will defends Auggie against Julian's mocking comments, respect evolves from passive tolerance to active defense, showing moral growth (00:08:14–00:08:33):

Julian : "No offense, but if you've never been in a real school before."
Jack Will : "Dude, he's been home-schooled."
Julian : "Okay, I'm just saying, science is supposedly really hard. But you're taking it too, right? Hey, maybe you could fail together."
Jack Will : "Why don't you get out of the way, so he can check it out?"

This scene was coded as "respect" because it involved standing up for dignity and fairness, core aspects in Eyre's framework.

Empathy also frequently emerges in school-based settings. Charlotte's intervention (00:09:23–00:09:39):

Julian : "What's the deal with your face?"
Jack Will : "Dude!"
Julian : "I mean were you in a car crash or something?"

Charlotte : "Julian!"
Julian : "What? Tushman said we could ask question if we wanted to."
Charlotte : "Not rude questions. Besides, he was born like that, Mr. Tushman said."

This data demonstrates socio-emotional awareness and aligns with Lickona's emphasis on understanding others' perspectives. Such instances were categorized as empathy because they included verbal and emotional support during social tension.

Family Contexts: Support and Emotional Growth

Scenes at home primarily display love, self-confidence, and perseverance. Nate, Auggie's father, reassures him before school (00:13:15–00:13:55), portraying love as unconditional support.

Dialogue:

Nate : "Hey, two rules. First, only raise your hand once a class, no matter how many answers you know. Except for science. Crush that one."
Auggie : "Check."
Nate : "Second, you're gonna feel like you're all alone, Auggie. But you're not."
Auggie : "Check."
Nate : "Should we lose this? Come on, costumes are for Halloween. Prepare for blastoff. I love you"
Auggie : "I love you, too."
Nate : "Have fun."
Auggie's response to Jack Will about plastic surgery (00:39:09–00:39:21):
Jack Will : "You ever thought about having plastic surgery?"
Auggie : "No, I've never thought about it. why? (chuckling). Dude, this is after plastic surgery! It takes a lotta work to look this good."

This dialogue shows humor and acceptance, coded under self-confidence due to the assertive way he embraces his identity. Family scenes often serve as moral anchors in the narrative, providing emotional strength that enables characters to handle external challenges. This context highlights how moral values are nurtured in close relationships.

Turning Points: Ethical Decisions and Character Shifts

Certain moments act as turning points in character development. Jack Will's apology scene (01:15:54–01:16:40) reflects honesty and justice.

Dialogue:

Jack Will : "I'm sorry for what I said."
Auggie : "Truth.. would you really kill yourself if you looked like me?"
Jack Will : "No. but I totally would if I looked like Julian."
Auggie : "Wait until he sees our science fair project!"
Jack Will : "So can we be friends again?"
Auggie : "OK."

Though categorized under Eyre's framework as "honesty," this moment also illustrates restorative justice, reinforcing accountability in peer relationships. The forest scene during the school trip (01:36:19–01:36:54), where Amos stands up for Auggie, reflects both courage and cooperation.

Relevant Dialogue:

Amos : "Jack!"
Jack Will : "Over here! Amos, come on! They follow you?"

Amos : "I think we lost them."
 Jack Will : "How did you guys know we needed help?"
 Amos : "We saw them follow you out the lodge. I think they were seventh graders. They were huge."
 Jack Will : "Thanks, guys. You totally saved our butts."
 Auggie : "Yeah, thanks guys."
 Amos : "You know, it was cool how you stood yor ground, little dude."

These values are portrayed through high-stakes decisions made under peer pressure, offering teachable moments for students.

Absent Values: Peaceability and Loyalty

Notably, peaceability and loyalty/dependability were not represented in the film. This absence likely stems from the narrative's focus on conflict resolution through confrontation rather than passive harmony. It also reflects the limitations of the frameworks when applied to a conflict-driven storyline. Highlighting these gaps is essential to avoid overgeneralizing the film's moral scope.

Summary of Moral and Character Values

The table below consolidates the frequency and thematic distribution of the main values:

Tabel 1 Summary Table of Moral and Character Values

Moral/Character Value	Frequency	Thematic Setting
Respect	5	School
Self-confidence	4	Home, School
Love	4	Family
Empathy	12	School, Family
Courage	4	School Trip, School
Honesty	2	School
Kindness	3	Mixed
Self-control	2	School
Justice	2	School
Cooperation	1	School Trip
Perseverance	1	Home
Peaceability	0	—
Loyalty	0	—

This table is not quantitative but illustrates where values manifest most prominently, offering educators a guide for scene selection based on classroom themes (e.g., bullying, peer empathy, family support).

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that *Wonder* presents moral values and character traits through a combination of emotional storytelling, relational conflicts, and personal growth arcs. Rather than merely tracking frequency, this study emphasizes how these values evolve across different social contexts—especially school and family settings. The results demonstrate that empathy and respect are central to the film's narrative, supporting the notion that emotional intelligence and social awareness are fundamental in character development. The dominance of empathy in school-related scenes suggests that the film intentionally addresses bullying not just as a behavioral issue but as a relational

one. Characters like Charlotte, Jack Will, and Via offer varying responses to Auggie's struggles, representing diverse levels of emotional maturity. This supports Lickona's (1991) view of character education as an interpersonal, socially embedded process, contrasting with Eyre's (1993) more principle-driven, moral absolutist framework.

Interestingly, values such as peaceability and loyalty are absent, possibly due to the film's focus on active confrontation and visible change rather than passive virtue. This absence may also reflect cultural or genre-based limitations: *Wonder* is a drama that thrives on emotional conflict, making it less likely to dwell on subdued or backgrounded virtues. This insight reveals the need to pair content analysis with narrative structure awareness. While Eyre's values like honesty, courage, and love are present, they often intersect with Lickona's traits such as empathy and perseverance. These overlaps suggest that a combined framework can yield a richer moral map, yet they also expose tensions for example, when honesty leads to social discomfort, or when courage opposes peaceability. Such complexities make *Wonder* a valuable teaching resource for discussing moral ambiguity and ethical decision-making.

In educational practice, teachers could utilize selected scenes to facilitate discussions and role-play activities. For instance, Charlotte's empathetic dialogue offers a model for anti-bullying campaigns. Jack Will's apology can initiate conversations on accountability, and Auggie's perseverance at school is ideal for exploring self-confidence. These scenes can be integrated into English learning, civic education, or dedicated character-building sessions. Aligned with Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum, which encourages student-centered and value-based learning, *Wonder* provides relatable content to foster moral reflection. It illustrates inclusive education, celebrates diversity, and models values applicable in real-life student interactions. Nevertheless, the study has limitations. Being qualitative, the coding relies on researcher interpretation, and the use of a single film may limit generalizability. Cultural context must also be considered, as values interpreted in a Western setting may differ in meaning or emphasis within Indonesian schools.

In summary, this study answered its central research question by demonstrating how *Wonder* communicates moral values and character traits through narrative, dialogue, and relationships. The film does not just tell a story, but it constructs a value-laden universe where empathy, respect, and courage are not merely present but evolve with context, conflict, and connection. Future research could explore comparative studies across films, assess student responses to film-based moral learning, or investigate the integration of character education into multimedia literacy programs.

CONCLUSION

The integration of both frameworks highlighted the strengths and tensions between principle-based and socio-emotional perspectives, offering a deeper moral reading of the film. While some values, such as peaceability and loyalty, were absent, their absence itself provided critical insights into the film's narrative choices and thematic priorities. In practical terms, *Wonder* offers educators a relatable and emotionally impactful resource for promoting moral discussions, especially in the context of character education aligned with Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum. Selected scenes can be used to address bullying, empathy, inclusion, and personal growth through interdisciplinary teaching approaches. However, the study is limited by its reliance on a single film and subjective coding. Future research could explore student interpretations, cross-cultural comparisons, or expanded media sources to deepen understanding of film as a character education tool. Ultimately, *Wonder* demonstrates the power of storytelling in shaping moral reasoning and emotional development, reinforcing the role of media as a pedagogical bridge between entertainment and ethical learning.

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