

The Architecture of Attachment: Emotional Foundations in R.J. Palacio's *Wonder*

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.905000461>

Received: 18 May 2025; Accepted: 21 May 2025; Published: 23 June 2025

ABSTRACT

R.J. Palacio's *Wonder* explores the emotional journey of August Pullman, a child with a craniofacial condition, as he navigates school and social relationships for the first time. This paper analyzes the novel through the lens of Attachment Theory, as developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, to examine the psychological dynamics underlying character development and interpersonal bonds. August's secure attachments with his parents and friends foster resilience and self-acceptance, while his sister Via's ambivalent attachment reveals her struggle for recognition within a family centered on her brother's needs. In contrast, Julian and his parents exhibit patterns of dismissive and disorganized attachment, highlighting emotional detachment and social intolerance. By aligning character experiences with attachment styles, the paper underscores how *Wonder* serves as a powerful medium for emotional and social learning. The study affirms the novel's capacity to cultivate empathy, inclusivity and emotional intelligence in young readers through its nuanced portrayal of relationships and identity.

Keywords: Attachment theory, character development, emotional and social learning, psychological dynamics and identity

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature plays a crucial role in shaping young readers understanding of themselves and the world around them. It often addresses themes of identity, diversity and acceptance, providing a narrative space where children can encounter experiences different from their own in a meaningful and empathetic way. Literature encourages readers to develop compassion, resilience and a broader sense of social awareness by engaging with characters who face challenges related to physical differences, social exclusion and personal adversity.

Children's literature fosters emotional intelligence and promotes inclusive values, through stories that highlight kindness, courage and the complexities of human relationships. It also centers on themes of difference and acceptance serves as an important educational tool, bridging emotional and social learning with literary engagement. Children's literature empowers children to develop confidence and self-worth, while also nurturing their ability to understand and support them.

Attachment Theory, first developed by John Bowlby and later expanded by Mary Ainsworth, helps us understand the important emotional bonds that form between children and their main caregivers. Bowlby emphasized the importance of a child's bond with their caretaker, stated in *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development*, "What cannot be communicated to the [m]other cannot be communicated to the self." (138). Bowlby's theory is the notion that attachment is an innate biological system crucial for survival.

Ainsworth's "Strange Situation" highlighted the importance of caregiver sensitivity in shaping secure attachment. She noted that sensitive mothers were more likely to have securely attached children, whereas inconsistency or rejection in caregiving often led to insecure attachments. Ainsworth opines, "Maternal

sensitivity is a key variable in the development of a secure attachment. The more attuned the caregiver is to the infant's signals, the more secure the attachment is likely to be" (110). Her findings have profound implications for both psychological practice and literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Several scholars have analyzed *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio from diverse perspectives, highlighting its psychological, social, and educational significance. Natasya Ayu Salsabilla's deconstruction analysis explores the binary oppositions within the novel, such as "perfect-imperfect" and "self-acceptance-mortification." She asserts, "The character has changed from being diffidence to confidence along with the storyline and can be concluded that being Wonder has multi-interpretations along the storyline"

Dhea Citaria Lukas and colleagues focus on the critical role of support systems in August Pullman's life, identifying family, teachers, friends and relatives as primary sources of encouragement. They state, the role of support system for August Pullman, in *Wonder*, about a positive and mutually supportive social environment, is crucial in building psychological well-being. Applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Nurfajri ani et al. analyze August's experiences with discrimination and personal growth. They conclude, "*The novel Wonder* by R.J. Palacio contained 13 data indicating that the character experienced discrimination... and 25 data indicating the Hierarchy of human needs" (46).

A study published in *Linguaculture* highlights how *Wonder* fosters empathy and emotional intelligence among young readers, eliciting emotionally literate responses through its narrative. Lastly, Janani K.S. and Manali Karmakar examine the novel through the lens of disability inclusion in children's literature, arguing that it "opens up a powerful space to dramatize the everyday lives of disabled children in an academic setting" (60) thereby promoting inclusive attitudes among young audiences.

Research Gap:

Although *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio has been widely analyzed for its themes of identity, inclusion, and psychological resilience, existing studies tend to focus either on broad psychological frameworks, such as Maslow's hierarchy or general social support systems, or on isolated character perspectives. There remains a notable gap in research that systematically applies **Attachment Theory** to explore the complex relational dynamics among multiple characters—especially how different attachment styles (secure, ambivalent, disorganized) shape their emotional development and social interactions within the narrative. Furthermore, while *Wonder*'s role in fostering empathy and inclusive values is recognized, there is limited examination of how these emotional and social lessons translate into practical outcomes in diverse cultural and educational contexts. This study aims to fill these gaps by offering a nuanced attachment-theoretical analysis that connects character relationships with broader emotional intelligence development, thereby enriching both literary and psychological understandings of the novel.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

R.J. Palacio's *Wonder* presents a poignant narrative centered on August Pullman, a boy born with a facial difference, as he navigates the social world of middle school for the first time. Beneath its surface of school drama and act of kindness lies a rich psychological framework that can be explored through Attachment Theory, a concept developmental psychology that explains how early bonds with caregivers shape one's social and emotional development. Auggie's relationship with his parents, sisters, friends and even bullies, offer a profound lens through which to examine secure and insecure attachment styles. The novel showcases how nurturing relationships serve as a secure base from which Auggie builds resilience, while strained or superficial bonds reveal emotional struggles for others. Through its vivid characters and the heartfelt moments, **Wonder** reflects the lasting impact of attachment patterns on identity, trust and the capacity to connect with others.

Insecure attachment:

The beginning of the novel *Wonder*, the protagonist August Pullman exhibits signs of insecure attachment, particularly avoidant behaviors. His craniofacial differences and the extensive medical procedures he endured, led to years of homeschooling and limited social interactions. As a result, August struggles with anxiety and fear of rejection, often anticipating negative reactions from his peers. August's insecurity is evident when he explains, "I won't describe what I look like. Whatever you're thinking, it's probably worse" (3). This reveals his internalized shame and a defensive detachment from others perceive him.

Secure attachment:

August's family provides **secure attachment** figures, especially his mother, who is consistently nurturing and protective. His mother plays a crucial role in nurturing his sense of self-worth. This is evident when August expresses fear about starting school, his mother responds gently, "You are not ugly, Auggie ... You just have to say that because you're my mom" (11). Her protective and encouraging nature helps buffer the emotional toll of social rejection.

The Halloween incident becomes a critical moment that exposes August's fragile trust. When he overhears Jack saying cruel things about him, he feels profoundly betrayed: "It was like the moment I looked in the mirror and saw not a kid staring back at me, but some deformed monster" (77). This reinforces his avoidant tendencies and fear of forming new relationships. However, these painful moments are offset by positive social experiences that foster growth. Summer's friendship marks the beginning of a secure peer relationship. She sits with him at lunch out of kindness, telling him, "When I saw you, the first thing I noticed was your eyes... you have really nice eyes" (119). Her empathy helps August feel seen beyond his appearance.

Jack's eventual apology and genuine friendship help rebuild August's trust. When Jack tells August, "If I looked like you, I swear, I'd walk around with my head up high like I had on an invisible crown" (196), it reflects the emotional validation August needs to shift from insecurity to confidence. By the end of the novel, August's growing sense of belonging is affirmed during the graduation ceremony, when he receives the Henry Ward Beecher medal for "carrying up the hearts of others" His reaction - "It was like I was floating" (304). This signals his transformation: from a child fearful of others judgment to one who has formed meaningful and secure attachments that empower his sense of self.

Ambivalent attachment:

In *Wonder*, Olivia "Via" Pullman demonstrates signs of **ambivalent attachment**, shaped by her complex role within a family where her brother August's needs dominate. While she deeply loves August and is protective of him, she often feels emotionally sidelined and invisible, resulting in conflicting feelings of attachment, longing and quiet resentment. This emotional tension manifests in her internal struggle to be seen and heard within her family system.

Via articulates this displacement in a striking metaphor: "August is the Sun. Me and Mom and Dad are the planets orbiting the Sun" (82). This image captures her perception of the family dynamic: August is the gravitational center, while she exists on the periphery. Though she accepts this reality with maturity, it also reveals the deep-rooted ambivalence in her emotional experience, both understanding and resenting her own marginalization.

A pivotal source of comfort and emotional security in Via's life was her grandmother, Grans. Unlike others, Grans acknowledged Via's inner struggles and offered her direct emotional validation. Via recalls Grans telling her, "You are my most favorite person in the world" (87), a rare moment in which Via feels genuinely prioritized. Grans's death leaves a profound void, removing the only consistent figure who made her feel seen and emotionally significant.

Via's decision to keep her school play a secret from her family illustrates her desire for independence and a need to establish an identity beyond her role as August's sister. she confesses, "I didn't want Mom and Dad to come to the first performance because I didn't want August to come" (104). This decision is not rooted in

bitterness, but in a quiet assertion of agency, an attempt to claim something of her own, unfiltered by her family's constant focus on August.

Via's relationship with Justin, her boyfriend, provides another important emotional anchor. Justin listens to her with patience and care, offering a stabilizing presence that contrasts with the emotional unpredictability she feels at home. He observes Via's vulnerability and unspoken pain, remarking, "The universe was not kind to Auggie Pullman, and it was certainly not kind to Olivia either" (187). Through Justin, Via experiences an emotionally responsive relationship, which helps her process the ambivalence she feels and move toward more secure emotional footing.

Ultimately, Via's journey is one of emotional negotiation - balancing love and loyalty with a growing need for self-definition. Through her independence and the comfort of a secure relationship with Justin, she begins to navigate her ambivalent attachment patterns and reclaim a sense of self that exists beyond the gravitational pull of her brother's needs.

Disorganized or dismissive-avoidant attachment:

In **Wonder**, Julian and his parents reflect a pattern of disorganized or dismissive avoidant attachment, manifesting in emotional detachment, lack of empathy and rigid social defenses. Julian, one of August's main antagonists, frequently uses bullying as a way to assert control and dominance within the school's social hierarchy. His cruelty is not merely childish meanness, but it signals deeper emotional dysfunction and an inability to process difference or vulnerability with compassion. This behavior suggests a defense mechanism rooted in fear, insecurity and emotional modeling likely learned from his home environment.

Julian's actions like mocking August's appearance, spreading rumors and creating an exclusionary environment that are the tactics designed to elevate his own social standing by demeaning others. When Julian says, "You don't have to pretend you're friends with that freak if you don't want to be" (77), he reveals a lack of empathy and a reliance on social cruelty to maintain status. These are typical markers of a dismissive-avoidant attachment style, in which individuals cope with emotional discomfort by distancing themselves from others and asserting superiority. Beneath Julian's outward confidence lies a fear of emotional closeness, which he masks through control and derision.

This dynamic becomes clearer when examining his parents, especially his mother. In her letter to Mr. Tushman, Julian's mother not only defends her son's behavior but also requests that August no longer be allowed to attend the school. This reveals her deep discomfort with difference and vulnerability. Her argument focuses not on August's feelings or rights, but on preserving a sanitized, aesthetically "normal" environment. This insistence on exclusion points to a narcissistic defense mechanism—one that denies the reality of difference in favor of rigid perfectionism and emotional repression.

This defensiveness is further revealed when it's discovered that Julian's mother photoshopped August out of the class picture: "It was the holiday picture... Julian's mom must have photoshopped Auggie out of it" (163). This action demonstrates an extreme rejection of difference and vulnerability—literally erasing August from a shared social memory to preserve a sense of visual and emotional "normalcy." Such behavior reflects disorganized attachment tendencies, where emotional discomfort is met not with empathy or openness, but with control, manipulation, and denial.

Her refusal to accept August's presence in the school community reveals more than prejudice. It reflects a disorganized attachment pattern in which emotions are not safely acknowledged and empathy is replaced by defensiveness and denial. Rather than guiding her son toward understanding or growth, she reinforces his cruelty, modeling emotional withdrawal and intolerance as acceptable responses to discomfort.

Together, Julian and his mother exemplify how dysfunctional attachment patterns in the home which is marked by emotional invalidation, image maintenance and fear of vulnerability, can shape a child's social behavior. In contrast to August's emotionally nurturing environment, Julian's world is one in which emotional control is

valued over emotional connection and where difference is perceived not as an opportunity for empathy, but as a threat to be eliminated.

CONCLUSION:

R.J. Palacio's **Wonder** offers more than a compelling narrative about difference and acceptance. The novel powerfully demonstrates how children's literature can shape emotional insight, foster empathy and raise social awareness. Through the lens of Attachment Theory, the novel offers a compelling exploration of how early emotional bonds -whether secure, ambivalent or disorganized - profoundly influence identity formation, interpersonal relationships and the capacity for resilience.

August Pullman's emotional growth is rooted in the secure attachments provided by his nurturing family and compassionate peers, illustrating how consistent emotional support fosters self-worth and trust in others. Via's ambivalent attachment, shaped by her peripheral role within a family centered on her brother's needs, reflects the nuanced struggles of self-definition and emotional visibility. In stark contrast, Julian's dismissive and disorganized attachment patterns reveal the consequences of emotional detachment, parental denial and the absence of empathy.

By weaving these psychological dimensions into a relatable narrative, *Wonder* does more than tell the story of a boy with a facial difference - it becomes a narrative space where young readers confront issues of difference, kindness, exclusion and acceptance. The application of Attachment Theory deepens our understanding of the characters' emotional landscapes and underscores the essential role of secure relationships in nurturing emotional intelligence.

Ultimately, **Wonder** exemplifies how children's literature can serve as both a mirror and a window—reflecting readers' internal struggles while offering perspectives into the lives of others. In doing so, it not only educates but also empowers, guiding children toward greater compassion, resilience, and a more inclusive vision of the world.

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