

When Beauty Means Goodness: Children's Perceptions of Body and Morality in Media Narratives

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ABSTRACT: This study dissects how children's storybooks construct body-related ideals of beauty and ugliness through the portrayals of heroes and villains, and how these depictions shape young readers' body perception and moral reasoning. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, we examined the narrative structures of selected storybooks alongside semi-structured interviews with second-graders (ages 7–8), in a qualitative deep-dive into how they perceive heroes and villains. Under the auspices of Creswell's social constructivism approach, the study highlights how children actively create meaning through their interactions with texts and their environments. The study looks into how children understand and occasionally challenge how characters are portrayed, as well as how discourses of morality, authority, and beauty standards are woven throughout them. Findings reveal that children don't just absorb dominant narratives, they remix textual cues with social influences and personal experience. The research contributes to understanding how early media exposure influences children's body image formation and aesthetic-moral judgments, underscoring the importance of balanced portrayals in promoting positive body attitudes and self-concepts.

KEYWORDS: Body Image Perception, Children's Literature, Media Representations, Beauty and Morality Association, Aesthetic and Moral Development, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Introduction

Throughout history, children's literature has been essential to young readers' social, emotional, and intellectual growth. From contemporary picture books and juvenile novels to traditional fairy tales and fables, children's literature serves functions well beyond mere amusement. During a child's early years, these texts play a crucial role in forming their language abilities, imagination, moral understanding, and sense of self. Children's stories have been an excellent source of inspiration and role models. Because of how powerful the role models it creates, upholds, and employs are, other media adopt them, including television, newspapers, and video games. Particularly, how the heroes and villains are portrayed has a significant impact on how young readers view identity, morality, and social conventions. Heroes are frequently portrayed as resilient, compassionate, honest, and attractive; they act as role models for children, teaching them positive traits and behaviors. These characters exhibit moral decision-making, personal development, and a subtle reinforcement of socially commendable beliefs. On the other hand, antagonists are often portrayed as ugly beings and having bad attributes like brutality, dishonesty, or selfishness. They are

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sometimes used to represent characteristics that children are subtly discouraged from acquiring. Children are shielded from making snap decisions about what is "good" or "bad" in both fiction and real life by the sharp contrast between the hero and villain. Repeated exposure to these character dichotomies throughout time can affect how kids see conduct in both themselves and others, influencing how they perceive morality, integrity, and appearance. This study deals with the character portrayals of "hero" and "villains" in children's storybooks and the impacts of these portrayals on the moral as well as aesthetic reasoning of child readers.

Literature Review

Since the invention of writing by man, literature has existed as a form of amusement, historical documentation, and communication of ideas and feelings. A variety of literary forms and genres have since developed for various audiences and objectives. A significant genre that has received notice lately is children's literature. Children's literature and its impact on growing minds is the central theme of this study.

Evolution in Children's Literature

There is nothing in classical literature that qualifies as a children's book in the sense of a work created especially to entertain young readers, as they were considered just a miniature version of men and women. The majority of Aesop's fables were folktales (Townsend, 1992). According to Townsend, before the invention of printing, books were rare and valuable, and creating books to entertain children would ultimately have been both financially and psychologically impossible. Furthermore, the lack of printing facilities is considered another reason for the unrecorded children's literature in the classical period. In England, monasteries were the primary refuges of learning, starting with the Roman withdrawal following the Norman Conquest and even for many years afterward. Monks were the instructors of such children who learned to read. As in Townsend's words: "I do not know of the any survival from the age of the manuscript that can be called a children's story. But there were manuscripts that embodied lessons for children: especially the 'courtesy books' which flourished in the fifteenth century" (3).

Characterization in Children's Literature

The sum of those features that set one individual apart from others. A characteristic is one such attribute. The qualities in this study include the roles that the characters perform in the stories, their physical attributes, their status, their personalities, and their stereotypes. Children's literature curricula and critical works hardly ever address characters and characterizations because they are such evident components of fiction. Who the characters are, what they do, or what they stand for, if they are mentioned at all, will probably be the inquiry (Nikolajeva, 2005). The Research on children's literature must address the ontological question of how literary characters relate to real characters. When compared to mainstream literature, children's book characters are more likely to be treated and evaluated like actual people (145,146). These days, we anticipate psychological traits in fictional characters. We also anticipate a discussion of Aristotle's ethos, ethics, and characters as psychological beings. Although children's books seem to be more focused on actions and events instead of dealing with psychological or character-related issues even today, we see a discernible shift towards characterization and psychological issues in Western children's books (147). Children are introduced to both their own and other people's environments through literary works. At early stages of development, children look up to older members of society and fictional characters and are inspired by them in their day-to-day interactions, supporting John Locke's Tabula Rasa theory. There is a higher chance that they will learn appropriate behavior if they are given the proper examples and circumstances. If not, society would continue to lament the rise in juvenile delinquency and social anomalies among her developing leaders of tomorrow (Emmanuel, 2022).

Portrayals of Heroes and Villains

The main lead characters of children's literature are usually found as heroes or villains. Children's literature shows two types of heroes: traditional and modern.

Traditional vs Modern Hero

Imagine the soldier who protects his people from magical attacks, the prince who rescues every damsel in trouble, or the knight in dazzling armor. Those who valiantly defeat an enemy force by using their physical or mental strength are usually considered traditional heroes in literature. These people, who exude charisma, courage, strength, and confidence, defend justice, peace, and society's values. Traditional heroes include Odysseus, Achilles, Hercules, and others. Here is a list of the traits of a classic hero's journey which are embodied by traditional hero according to Campbell, an invitation to adventure with the possibility that it will be rejected, characters who have vulnerabilities on their own are frequently helped by supernatural beings or protecting entities, trials and Difficulties, goal of knowledge or self-discovery, return to the everyday world, elixir to better the world (Campbell, 2008).

Modern-day hero doesn't consist of supernatural assistance and is an ordinary human being, which makes it much more difficult for him to portray his heroic qualities solely by actions. In contrast to conventional heroes, certain ordinary hero archetypes feature fewer pivotal moments in their stories, giving people more discretion in judging whether or not they qualify as heroes. Contemporary heroes are more flawed than classic heroes, which is the most obvious distinction. All-perfect godlike individuals that symbolize unachievable aspirations are no longer idolized by society. The hero who suffers, fails, and comes out more resilient and stronger is the one that society prefers (Shang, 2018).

Villains' Portrayals and their Evolution

As heroes share the same traits under the same circumstances according to different critics, villains must have commonalities as well. According to Baker, these similarities among heroes inspire writers to create villains who share traits like being associated with darkness, desiring unchallenged control, wanting to eradicate individuality, and so forth (Baker, 2006). Another trait, according to Loidl (2010), is the wish for immortality by villains. They are willing to pay any cost for it, while heroes, in certain situations, are willing to sacrifice their lives. As mentioned in (Tatar, 1993), the hero is a victimized person at the start of a tale but ultimately comes out victorious, while the villain is shown to be mighty but ends up licking the ground. Contrary to this notion, the modern villain doesn't necessarily be punished by the end of the tale, nor does he oppose the protagonist in a traditional way. In modern literature, the antagonist is reflected in the villain, much as a foil draws attention to specific facets of the hero's personality. Even if the new enemy engages in brutality, murder, or even cannibalism, they are a captivating character who frequently diverts the focus away from the chosen hero. In contrast to the hero of earlier decades, the modern villain captivates the audience, and they are prepared to overlook the villain's worst transgressions. While the contemporary audience may find something redeemable in these villains from earlier works, villains introduced during the nineteenth century, and most definitely in the Post-Modern era, are crafted almost explicitly to evoke awe and pity (Campo, 2017).

Differences in Character Portrayals between Heroes and Villains

Prior study indicates that heroes are typically depicted as tidy and well-dressed, while villains are frequently described as filthy or "scruffy" (Allison Eden, 2015). Another difference in the portrayals of hero vs villain is their positions throughout the tale, as according to Tatar, the hero is often portrayed as an oppressed or victimized one in the beginning of the tales but develops to be a victor who punishes the villains and ends the tale in a victorious way. At

the same time, the villain is shown to be a powerful one at the start of a tale and ends up licking the ground. Such radical transformation in the positions of characters is portrayed in children's literature to give an expression of motivation to underprivileged children (Tatar, 1993).

Influence of Portrayals on Children's Moral and Aesthetic Views

Raney maintained that viewers can rapidly comprehend a character's position in a narrative play by using character schemas, which are based on their prior narrative knowledge. Character schemas would be especially well-practiced in hero and villain characters because fiction typically centers on a fight between "good" and "evil" individuals (Raney, 2004). Particular portrayals and representations of protagonists and antagonists in children's stories influence their views about those characters as well as the outer world. Talking about the moral aspects of an antagonist character, it is crucial to look at the villain's communication style, IQ, hostility, psychological motivations (drivers), and dehumanization principle in order to build the value component of their image and comprehend their communication behavior. As Osipov mentions in his study, Cult villains are exceptionally skilled at rhetoric and exhibit above-average verbal intelligence; they can manipulate others by using their persuasive discourse to make their immoral behavior seem reasonable and acceptable (Osipov, 2024). Heroes are tempted by villains. They might have served to emphasize a particular facet of the hero's personality, or they might serve as friends or even family (Campo, 2017).

Aesthetics, a branch of philosophy that comes from the Greek word for "sensation" or "perception," studies the nature of art, whether it is beautiful or not, and the nature of beauty, if it is natural. Originating from the Greek word "Aestheticos" or "Aisthesis," aesthetics is the academic title for a field of philosophy called "The Science of Beauty" (Ismail, 2021). Meanwhile, taking into account the child's engagement, age, and gender, Ezan and Lagier (2009) found that visual attractiveness is the most important factor in determining children's aesthetic value (Ismail, 2021). Children's perception of beauty and ugliness gets influenced by certain portrayals in media and fiction. Gilbert (1998) examined media portrayals of the body as well as five- and six-year-old children's body perceptions and preferences in order to better understand how children establish their ideal body form. Both boys' and girls' comments indicated that they prefer smaller, more attractive people over fat people because of the images they see in fashion magazines (Sylvia Herbozo, 2004). Numerous studies also imply that children's perceptions of specific body types are linked to their body stereotypes. Early childhood seems to be when the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype first emerges, as mentioned in Rodin et al. (1985). Preschoolers view attractive friends as kinder and smarter than unattractive peers, according to their findings. According to Kirkpatrick and Sanders (1978), children aged six to nine linked positive phrases to an average figure, or mesomorph. Conversely, the youngsters used terms like "fights," "cheats," "gets teased," "lazy," "lies," "mean," "dirty," and "stupid" to rank an endomorph (fat) figure more negatively (Sylvia Herbozo, 2004). Frequent exposure to children's books and videos may also cause young kids to internalize the traits linked to obesity and thinness and overestimate their perceptions of the ideal body shapes for men and women, which could put them at risk for eating disorders and body image issues (Sylvia Herbozo, 2004).

While there are a number of studies that examine the different aspects of children's literature such as gender biases in characterization, disability portrayals, racism, etc., we find limited research about character portrayal of hero and villain with respect to their physical appearances and how those portrayals influence child readers' aesthetic as well as moral reasoning. Early childhood is an age where perceptions are more prone to be influenced by external factors, and children internalize everything they read in fiction and watch on media, etc. The other thing it evokes is their perspective towards others' physical appearance being associated with personality attributes. This way, children develop a reciprocal approach towards others' appearance and personality. Our study is a development towards the

efforts of making children's literature as unbiased as possible towards different dimensions of individual differences. This study aims to address the traditional approach of presenting the hero as an ideal type of character, whereas the villain is portrayed in such a disgusting way that his physical characteristics leave a lifelong impact on the child reader's mind, which plays a dangerous role in poisoning young children's minds and their moral reasoning.

Methodology

This study draws on Creswell's social constructivism theory, which explains how social interactions shape opinions. In this view, people interpret their environment by assigning subjective meanings to their experiences. The diversity of these meanings leads researchers to explore complex viewpoints rather than reduce them to a few categories (Creswell, 2014, p. 36). A qualitative approach was used to analyze hero–villain portrayals in children's storybooks and explore children's perspectives through semi-structured interviews. CDA was used to analyze children's interviews and meaning construction through social influence.

Sample

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants based on the study's objectives, ensuring the selected group would offer pertinent insights. This targeted approach, based on the researchers' expertise, was suitable for focusing on children familiar with storybooks containing clear hero–villain portrayals (see Table 1). The sample comprised six second-grade students (aged 7–8) from The City School, Gujrat (Bhimber Road campus).

Table 1

Sample Profile

Sr#	Book title	Author	Heroic character	Villain character	Main theme
1.	Matilda	Roald Dahl	Matilda & Miss Honey	Miss Trunchbul, Mr. & Mrs. Wormwoods	Triumph of the good over evil
2.	Cinderella	Charles Perrault	Cinderella	Anastasia & Drizella	Kindness wins over selfishness
3.	James and Giant Peach	Roald Dahl	James Henry Trotter	Aunt Spiker & Aunt Sponge	The power of teamwork and friendship
4.	Ratatouille	Katherine Emmons	Remy	Chef Skinner	unjustified restrictions on identity

Method of Data Collection

Data collected for this study consists of textual as well as interview data. Textual description of heroes vs. villains is gathered from different children's storybooks. Storybooks are compiled from schools and diverse internet resources, considering readability and adaptation by modern child readers. Descriptions of hero as well as villain characters are collected carefully from relevant storybooks. The second set of data is collected through interviews from fifth-grade school students who are story readers. Interview transcriptions are taken into consideration while doing analysis.

Method of Data Analysis

To analyze the textual description of heroes and villains in children's story books and interview data of children, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used. Critical Discourse Analysis, being a qualitative research approach, is used to analyze how language constructs, challenges, and reflects social power, inequality, and dominance. CDA, in this

context, allows us to analyze how the textual description of particular characters, i.e., heroes and villains, leads to shaping an opinion in child readers and how children express their moral and aesthetic reasoning about these characters, which is influenced by the textual description of those characters in children's storybooks.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws its framework from Creswell's social constructivism theory which explains how social interactions dominates in shaping opinions. In social constructivism, people try to comprehend the environment they reside and work in. They give their experiences subjective meanings, meanings that are focused on certain things. Because of the diversity of these meanings, the researchers choose to focus on the complexity of viewpoints instead of reducing them into a smaller group of concepts or categories (Creswell, 2014, p. 36). A qualitative method of inquiry has been employed to analyze the textual descriptions of heroes vs. villains in children's story books and to relate this study to children's points of view through semi-structured interviews.

In our current study, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is employed for the descriptive analysis of heroes and villains' portrayals in children's story books and to analyze the interviews of children to assess their moral reasoning shaped by reading this fiction. Application of CDA is expected to expose the ideology behind opposite portrayals of heroes and villains, as well as to help analyze children's narratives about these portrayals and how they impact children's perception of the association of beauty and ugliness with particular characters.

Data Analysis

The analysis identifies salient thematic patterns, illustrating children's negotiation of moral and aesthetic meanings via discursive representations of heroes and villains, influenced by visual, linguistic, and narrative cues.

Ugly Representation of Villains

In this analysis, villains' representation is analyzed in terms of how they are represented in children's storybooks and how the focus is put on their physical appearance as well as their wrongdoings. Characters like Miss Trunchbull, Aunt Spiker, Aunt Sponge, Chef Skinner, and Cinderella's ugly sisters Anastasia and Drizella are well known for their evilness.

Masculinized Female Bodies and the Loss of Femininity (Miss Trunchbull)

The prime evil character of the history of children's literature, Miss Trunchbull, is the powerful headmistress in Roald Dahl's *Matilda*. She is a complex and exaggerated figure. An extremely awful portrayal of her physical attributes conveys a sense of ugliness and fright. Syntactical choices such as: "*She has an obstinate chin, a cruel mouth and small arrogant eyes*", in literature, a chin depicted as obstinate or stubborn can be defined by its forward protrusion, akin to a head raised high in a rebellious posture. Her double chin and small eyes are mentioned as an opposite of the beauty standards and make her less feminine, as she doesn't fit the feminine beauty standards of literature. Metaphors such as "*she was a gigantic holly terror*", "*a fierce tyrannical monster who frightened the life out of pupils and children alike*" show her abuse of power and authoritarian behavior. Dahl depicts Miss Trunchbull as inhuman and horrible through exaggeration and ugly imagery. The use of certain adjectives creates a semantic field of monstrosity and dehumanizing her, such as Cruel, monster, beastly, horsey, hulking, and terrifying. Even her name gives an animalistic impression, e.g., Trunch-bull. Here, Dahl deftly highlights Miss Trunchbull's strength, anger, and lack of empathy by drawing a metaphorical connection to a bull based on her appearance and demeanor. For example, on one occasion:

"She picked up the small girl by one arm and flung her like a Frisbee," which doesn't seem a human act at all and certainly gives an impression of a bull trait. Dahl portrays her as fearsome and ridiculous simultaneously through her dialogue *"I'll have you for breakfast boy"*; of course she is not going to eat that boy, but this reflects the absurd extremes of her character. She is compared to the other animals in a multitude of metaphors that convey an inhumane impression. Such as:

".... Said miss Trunchbull, in a voice like an angry dog", "she eats like a pig".

The above metaphors reduce her to a sub-human status by invoking fear and disgust. A sense of ugliness is then conveyed by the several instances in which she is compared to males and her strength and physique are equated with masculinity. *"Like a great, she-male wrestler"*, *"The muscles stood out in her arms"*. Her lack of femininity is associated with a lack of sensitivity and empathy. Even in simple declarative sentences like *"She looked more like a man than a woman"*, Dahl gives an absolute judgment about her that is non-negotiable. The discursive practice of equating unattractiveness with villainy reflects wider trends in media where physical traits are loaded with ideological meanings (Irshad & Yasmin, 2023).

Grotesque Corpulence and Gluttony as Moral Decay (Aunt Sponge & Spiker)

Similarly, another example of Dahl's ugly villains is 'Aunt Sponge' and 'Aunt Spiker' from the children's story book 'James and the Giant Peach'. Exaggerated and grotesque language is used to portray these villains as extremely unpleasant in appearance and ugly, which is a hallmark of Roald Dahl's stories. The frequently used adjectives like ugly, brute, terribly flabby, enormously fat and horrible construct her appearance as repellent and grotesque. Dahl highlights Aunt Sponge's grotesqueness with a hilarious rhyming couplet.

"Aunt Sponge was terrifically fat,

And tremendously flabby at that.."

Satire is more palatable to kids because of the humorous verse's juxtaposition with the character's brutality. Dahl uses metaphors such as *"she was a great white soggy overboiled cabbage"* to equate her to something unpleasant in looks and smell. He takes her depiction to the level of dehumanization by using the phrase *"A repulsive lump of flesh"*, which gives an impact of her being just a mass(flesh) and not a human figure. Certain hyperbole refers to her character as a greedy image, such as *"he looked like a stomach on legs"*, where her whole body is encapsulated into a single image. Her ugly, fat body is linked to her greed for eating, such as *"she ate all the things that were bad for her as fatty foods, chocolates, cream, cakes and biscuits"*; here her extreme greed is highlighted, which becomes evident in the scenario of the giant peach when she and her sister Aunt Spiker make the giant peach a revenue stream. The other villainous character in 'James and Giant Peach' is Aunt Spiker, who is the sister of Aunt Sponge and is equally evil and greedy as Aunt Sponge. She is not as ugly as Aunt Sponge; in fact, she considers herself to be the most elegant and slender. Dahl mocks her self-perception by using adjectives like lean and mean, long neck, bony, etc. Her appearance is built in contrast with Aunt Sponge, as she is quite skinny, which gives an impression of a skeleton. Her appearance is mocked by the narrator in a metaphor as *"looked like a skeleton with skin stretched over it"*. Her voice is equally sharp as her looks, as mentioned in the text: her voice *"could slice through stones"*, *"a voice like a screeching owl"*. Here her voice is symbolized with her harsh personality and rigidity. She is portrayed as evil, like her sister Aunt Sponge, and her evilness is aligned with her appearance, like all Dahl's villains.

Petite Aggression and Moral Inferiority (Chef Skinner)

Another combination of ugly appearance and negative personality traits is portrayed in 'Ratatouille', a children's story book, through the character portrayal of Chef Skinner. He is characterized as a small, defensive, and controlling

figure. His negativity lies more in his actions rather than looks, though he doesn't have a pleasant personality at all. Adjectives used to portray his appearance are short, angry, snappy, and bossy (subconscious association between personality and unpleasantness). His short body is contrasted with his larger ambitions, to dominate others and to steal Gusteau's legacy. His exaggeratedly severe posture and furious facial expressions represent aggression-covered insecurity. His physical features are described as '*Squinty eyes*', '*hunched posture*', and '*large nose*'. Richards tries to create a figure who is untrustworthy, nasty, and arrogant through his physical features and expressions. His facial distortion reveals his moral ugliness. Metaphors are used to reveal his insecurity and controlling behavior as '*a gatekeeper blocking talent*'. He was quite insecure about Remy's talent, so he didn't let him come in front at any cost. The construction of Chef Skinner's ugliness involves a meticulous layering of verbal tone, symbolic contrast, and visual metaphors rather than overt insults. His sneering look, domineering demeanor, and exaggerated smallness all serve as textual indicators of internal corruption.

Failed Femininity and Comic Ugliness (Anastasia & Drizella)

Anastasia and Drizella are the stepsisters of Cinderella and the daughters of Lady Tremaine. They are portrayed as ugly, jealous, and absurd characters who hate Cinderella out of jealousy. Adjectives for their physical appearance: Gaudy, garish, dowdy, clumsy, hulking, ungraceful, crooked, pudgy, misshapen, loud (usually referring to their loud makeup and loud dressing), which constructs their image as extremely unpleasant figures. They are portrayed as exaggeratedly ugly to make a contrast with Cinderella's beauty. They are shown to be ugly inside out through the adjectives for their inner ugliness: '*mean spirit*', '*jealous*', '*spiteful*', '*arrogant*', '*bitter*', '*vain*', '*cruel*', '*petty*', '*shallow*,' etc. These semantic choices make them extremely unpleasant and loathsome. Their jealousy of Cinderella is mentioned frequently, which is the ultimate reaction from their side when they're gaslighted by Cinderella's beauty. Metaphors and simile used for their appearance:

"they looked like peacocks in a windstorm",

"painted like a pair of startled clowns",

"faces twisted like badly kneaded dough",

"walking disasters wrapped in tulle and feathers", through all the above metaphors they are disgusted due to their looks and compared to different objects such as '*peacocks in a windstorm*', shows their struggle to look elegant but ultimately failure is faced every time, '*a pair of startled clown*', as they are always covered in makeup layers and move around together o they give an image of a pair of clowns. Their faces are badly targeted to portray their extreme ugliness. Their inner self is aligned to their outer ugliness by using metaphors such as: "Their hearts were as twisted as their curls", "jealousy dripped off them as melted wax", "ugly not in face but in soul, like wilted roses laced with thorns", "as beautiful as lie told twice", "Their smiles cracked like porcelain masks hiding scorns".

These metaphors connect their inner ugliness to their outer unpleasant personalities to give an impression of association of evil and ugly. The ideology that I highlighted in these portrayals emphasizes outward attractiveness. It's crucial to understand in critical discourse analysis that these descriptions represent ideological contrast, such as how Cinderella's goodness is highlighted by exaggerating the sisters' shortcomings. Calling them "ugly" frequently reinforces the moral dichotomy that "ugliness = bad character," which can be damaging if not properly examined. Because of their garish makeup, awkward postures, and exaggerated facial expressions, youngsters frequently view them as humorous villains.

On the whole, this construction of ugliness in the plots constructs moral corruption in a way that relates to the physical body. Profusion, materiality, and magnified proportions are code for greediness, cruelty, and deviance.

Through such representations, children's literature teaches youthful readers to equate unattractive bodies with a deficiency of the interior, eroding the boundary between form and content enough to make physical attractiveness a source for a moral barometer. The discourse not only stigmatizes difference, but also makes aesthetic discrimination a natural form of moral judgment acceptable. The second section, on the other hand, examines the mirror image of this - how beauty, grace, and bodily perfection are used to indicate virtue and moral purity.

Association of Beauty and Goodness in Heroes

The analysis goes on to uncover that physical beauty in children's stories is not simply an aesthetic feature but a moral one. Beautiful characters are always associated with gentleness, empathy, and ethical integrity, putting appearance as evidence of a character's virtue. Such portrayals naturalize the belief that goodness is manifested through bodily harmony, grace, and softness - least of all for female characters. This aesthetic connection - moral connection reproduces gendered morals of idealized femininity and reinforces the binary opposition already mentioned between the "ugly-evil" and "beautiful-good." The following subsections show how this discourse works in terms of the recurrence of character types (i.e., Miss Honey and Cinderella).

Gentle Femininity as Moral Ideal (Miss Honey)

Miss Honey from 'Matilda' is the most liked and beloved character in children's literature. She was a teacher at Matilda's school. Miss Honey is portrayed as a polite, gentle, and positive character. Dahl frequently uses adjectives such as "kind", "gentle", "sweet", "soft spoken", "caring", "humble", "understanding", "friendly", "compassionate", and "good-natured" to elaborate on her goodness. In contrast to the harsh language used for figures such as Miss Trunchbull, these words portray her as caring and morally upright. Metaphors such as "*She was like a breath of fresh air*" are used to show her pleasant personality and associate her goodness with her physical appearance. Miss Honey uses straightforward, compassionate language in her words, reflecting her kind disposition. Dahl narrates her care and understanding for children's needs very well, as mentioned in this line, "*She seemed to understand exactly what the children needed and gave it to them*". Her character, where reflects positivity and goodness, another strong message is given through her character that beauty is reflected through positivity or vice versa. "*She had a lovely pale oval Madonna face with blue eyes, and her hair was light brown*". The allusion to the "Madonna face" connects Miss Honey to the lengthy history of religious symbolism that emphasizes purity, tenderness, and maternal care. 'Blue eyes' and the 'light brown hair' add to an angelic, gentle ideal of femininity that places her in direct contrast to Miss Trunchbull, being characterized in horrific, exaggerated terms. Mentioning her personality, Dahl uses similes, "*As soft and fragile as a snowflake*". The above phrase highlights the two qualities of her personality, 'soft' and 'fragile'. Softness implies her kindness and gentleness, and fragility gives the impression of delicacy and vulnerability, as her character is vulnerable in front of Miss Trunchbull but kind and soft for children. In the above sentences, her beauty is compared to her positive character, where a child reader easily understands the goodness possessed by this very character by just being given her physical portrayal. This binary construction of female figures as either nurturing and gentle or villainous and dominant parallels broader discursive patterns observed in Pakistani fiction, where femininity is framed within polarized constructs of virtue and vice (Yasmin & Safdar, 2021). In another simile, "*Miss Honey's voice was as soft as butter*", the narrator tries to evoke warmth, comfort, and tenderness Miss Honey provides to the pupils. Despite being the most beloved character by kids, she doesn't dominate the novel but plays a passive role by working in the background, as Dahl labels her as "*The quiet savior*". In another metaphor, Dahl calls her "*A tigress in a cage*", which reflects her emotional resilience as she too is a victim of oppression by Miss Trunchbull. Subtle actions and dialogues are used to draw a clear picture of Miss Honey's character as she understands children very well and is adored by them, which is reflected by children's dialogues as mentioned by Dahl: "*She possessed that*

rare gift for being adored by every small child under her care". Her care and understanding are reflected in children's dialogues such as, *"There is a kind of magic in you, Miss Honey (spoken by Matilda)*.

Physical Beauty as Symbolic Goodness (Cinderella)

Similarly, the character of Cinderella is also adored for her beauty and goodness, which are often aligned through different metaphors such as "her beauty was the reflection of her soul" and "as lovely in heart as she was in face". Her beauty is mentioned as a reason and a background force for her goodness. She is portrayed as being a "a star among cinders", where her character is contrasted with her ugly and evil stepsisters and stepmother. She is shown to be a sole positive and pleasant figure among all other females for her physical as well as inner beauty. *"She shone like a moon on a cloudless night"*. This shows her uniqueness among all other female characters, which led the prince to choose her among all the eligible girls at the ball. Describing her extreme beauty and delicacy, the narrator uses metaphors like *"her beauty bloomed like a rose in spring"*, "delicate as a morning dew on petals", "she moved like a whisper of silk in a dream", "her heart was a lantern that never dimmed".

Similes and metaphors are used to exaggerate her beauty and goodness to show an extremely positive and pleasant image of this figure. Certain adjectives are used to describe her beauty and goodness to give a polysemic effect, such as *lovely* (both by face and by heart), *fair* (light-skinned and beautiful as well as righteous), *gentle* (by look as well as by heart), *Angelic* (heavenly beauty and purity), and sweet-faced (shows her inner kindness reflecting through her face).

Beauty and physical appearance are used as a vehicle to deliver her positive imagery in this novel, as her goodness is associated with her appearance. A beautiful character is ultimately positive in such stories to prove that goodness and beauty are inseparable.

In short, beauty in these stories is used as moral evidence. An idea of gracefulness and physical gentleness is used to identify characters as inherently good, reaffirming the aesthetic-ethical dualism so central to children's media. Along with the previous section, these findings show how appearance becomes a moral language through which readers of a young age acquire techniques to read bodies that signal virtue or vice.

Children's Voices on Beauty and Morality

This section presents children's own interpretations of heroes and villains to show how textual aesthetic-moral binaries are taken up in real meaning-making. Their accounts demonstrate that appearance is often used as a first moral filter, and only later do actions become relevant. Four common themes were present in the interviews and are presented below.

Visual Appearance as a Primary Moral Cue

Character judgments made by participants were largely based on visual stimuli first. A theme that ran throughout the answers was the idea that beauty has been linked to heroic nature and ugliness in villains. Heroes are described as "tidy," "cute like unicorn," "cute," "simple," or "good looking." As R6 elaborated,

"But in start I will judge by seeing their faces and if it's good looking power man it's a hero. But sometimes people look like hero but they are villain because they have powers and they look normal then I will see what he is doing, helping people or harming people so that I can judge him if it's a hero or a villain."

Children respondents clearly marked their preference for appearance over actions. Another respondent, R1, equated good looks with good actions when he said, "Heroes looks good and do good stuff like mostly heroes are kind people."

Whereas villains are “ugly,” “dirty,” “aggressive,” and “angry-faced.” This disparity is not merely aesthetic but also ideological, with beauty symbolically linked to benevolence and ethical excellence, while physical unattractiveness serves as a literary indicator of inner depravity. For instance, one child stated, “Ugly people are villains always and only beautiful people are heroes” (R3). This illustrates an early aesthetic–moral essentialism in which bodily appearance is read as proof of inner character. These statements exemplify a discursive inclination to assess character value through a visual-moral lens, whereby aesthetic qualities signify ethical implications. Even in theoretical situations involving physically unappealing characters who perform benevolent acts, children frequently exhibit skepticism towards their morality, suggesting a deeply rooted conviction that outward appearance is indicative of inner virtue.

The representation of figures like 'Cinderella' and 'Miss Honey', who are both physically beautiful and morally upright, supports children's belief that a hero is a beautiful person. The protagonist character Cinderella stands out from the nasty and ugly stepsisters because of her kindness and humility, which are strongly correlated with her physical attractiveness. Children are encouraged by these contrasts to link virtue and physical appearance.

Costuming and Aesthetic Codes

Children also relied on clothing and colour to classify characters. Their ratings indicated that clean-cut and tidy clothing was associated with being heroic, and dark, exaggerated, or “funny” costumes were more associated with being villainous. For example, one participant said, “The bad lady is wearing black and she looks scary,” while another said, “Good people wear clothes nicely and they wear bright clothes.” These words tell of the way outward appearance works as a moral sign: neat, light-coloured clothes are a sign of righteousness, disarrayed or dark clothing is a sign of evil intent.

Several children also continued this trend by describing the clothes of villains as “weird,” “dirty” or “like Halloween,” which implies they do perceive the costume as a proxy for moral value. On the other hand, elegant or coloured clothes were considered positive indicators of friendliness, decency and social acceptance. These associations recall the textual imagery of Miss Trunchbull, Chef Skinner and the stepsisters mentioned above, for whom visual excess or distortion is a parallel for moral corruption.

Overall, the interview data indicate costume and color are used as semiotic shortcuts through which children decipher moral identity. Appearance therefore becomes a moral language, educating young readers that the way a character looks and dresses is a signifier for that character.

Beauty as a Moral Certainty

Children interpreted beauty as a shortcut to virtue. They found attractive characters were consistently described as “good,” “kind,” and “helpful,” whereas less attractive characters were judged to be “rudy” or “bad.” One participant commented, “Beautiful people always do something for others,” and another, “Ugly ones get mad or injure someone.” These remarks indicate that bodily attractiveness is seen as a moral fact that enables children to make moral judgments, without recourse to behavior.

Many of the respondents rationalized the crimes of attractive heroes with the assumption that their behaviors must have ‘a good reason.’ This reveals that beauty is not only a predictor of goodness, but also able to make a moral breach appear excused. The logic of the children is the reflection of the aesthetic-ethical structures of the fairy books, which combine harmony of the body with virtue.

All in all, beauty is a moral certainty in the reasoning of the child: goodness is seen, embodied, indisputable. Such interpretations point to a preliminary internalization of cultural values which associate appearance with morality, ratified already by the textual analysis that implies a connection between beauty and goodness.

Emulation of Heroic Traits

Upon being questioned about whether they emulated or aspired to be like their favorite characters, each participant responded in the affirmative, often specifying the admirable moral or personality traits—such as loyalty, intelligence, or compassion—that served as inspiration. These findings demonstrate that children's moral development is influenced by the characteristics of visually and ethically idealized role models. One child stated, *"I try to be intelligent and bookish like Matilda"* (R3), while another said, *"I try to be soft like Cinderella"* (R2). These responses demonstrate that literary and animated representations not only entertain but also shape children's self-perception and behavioral values, often promoting characters who adhere to conventional standards of physical attractiveness.

Perception of Ugliness as a Moral Corruption

Nearly all responders to the question "if villains can do anything good" disagreed that villains can do anything good since villains are naturally evil and aren't supposed to do good things, as according to R5, *"They never do good stuff because they never have good heart"*. Children believe that villains are created to stand in contrast to heroes, i.e., good people, which illustrates how these two characters are perceived as being in binary opposition. "... they only do opposite things of what hero do." This illustration places the villains in extreme opposition to the heroic characters, so the stance of a 'villain doing good stuff' is equally rejected by all respondents. Response of R2 aligns well with the character of Miss Trunchbull and Aunt Sponge, i.e., *"villain always hurt others for no reasons"*. These villains' unexplained and absurd evilness is marked in the words of the above respondents that villains do evil just for the sake of evil and *"they are made to hurt people and harm people"* (R4). Absurd and bazar punishments by Miss Trunchbull and Aunt Sponge is another example that aligns with another statement by the same respondent that *"They do weird things to harm others"* (R4).

Interview data indicates that children's understanding of literary characters is significantly influenced by aesthetic and moral stereotypical cues. Their moral interpretations are frequently visual, relying on established cultural dichotomies like the equation of beauty with goodness and ugliness with evil.

Discussion

This analysis investigated how heroes and villains are portrayed in children's literature by their physical and moral attributes and how young readers understand these representations using interview analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA) of a few chosen texts. Through a combination of child-centered interviews and text-based analysis, the study offers a multifaceted picture of how language shapes moral identities and how children internalize these messages. The CDA found that positive, idealized traits like "beautiful," "kind," "gentle," "brave," and "strong" were frequently used to characterize and depict the heroes. On the other hand, villains were portrayed with grotesque features such as "ugly", "fat", "authoritative", "cruel", "beasty" and "evil". These linguistic discourses supported normative notions about morality that is reflected in appearance by aligning with binary oppositions, such as good vs. evil and beautiful vs. ugly. Analysis of interviews with young readers confirmed these trends. While describing heroes' perception in their mind they used words such as "tidy", "cute", "simple", "good looking", "kind", "helping" and "good" and upon asking about villains they mention adjectives like "ugly", "evil", "troublemaker", "untidy" etc. These answers show how literary discourse shapes children's moral and character perceptions, supporting flimsy conclusions that link virtue to physical appearance. Through its narrative framework, the examined

literature actively reproduces societal beauty standards in addition to reflecting them. This is further supported by the children's interpretations, which demonstrate how these discourses are taken in at early developmental stages—often without any resistance.

These findings bring up significant issues regarding the long-term effects of moral stereotypes in children's books. Similar discourse patterns have been identified in studies of gendered and ideological media representations, where readers internalize dominant aesthetic and moral codes embedded in texts (Yasmin & Safdar, 2022). Children may start applying these judgments outside of fiction if morality is continuously associated with looks, which could have an impact on how they perceive actual people. Such as upon asking that if an ugly character can be a good and helpful person or a hero, almost all child respondents rejected the idea and only one respondent showed conditional support for such character. These elaborations are further supported by the text analyzed in this study such as characters like Miss Trunchbull, Aunt Spiker, Aunt Sponge, Chef Skinner, and the ugly sisters of Cinderella all are portrayed to be ugly and doing bad stuff. There is no ugly character who is a normal or good person, all goodness is shown to be associated with beautiful characters such as Cinderella and Miss Honey. There is only Remy's character who is an animal and not a beautiful human but still his dehumanization and stigmatization in the hands of chef Skinner gives a negative message to children. The findings point to the urgent need for more inclusive, diversified character representations that disentangle morality from physical attractiveness and deformity.

Conclusion

The present study shows that children's picture books serve not only as vehicles of entertainment, but that they are also the means whereby powerful messages linking physical appearance with moral goodness are conveyed. Through a close textual analysis supported by the interpretive accounts of child participants, the study shows that beauty systematically serves as the symbol of goodness, while uglification is constructed as the symbol of evil. Such ethical-aesthetic dichotomies implant in young readers the inclination to read material bodies as moral signifiers; consequently, this has determined the way they perceive notions of goodness, difference, and intrinsic value. They have also shown that body image has its roots early on in childhood, way before the onset of any other type of exposure to the body image of today's society through contemporary media such as social networks or advertisements. The visual encoding of moral values through the dichotomy of beauty versus deformity is internalized by children who represent aesthetic hierarchies and thereby develops mechanisms of self-assessment and scaffolding of its occurrence in the peer assessment. Parents, educators, and creative professionals who have an interest in encouraging body acceptance and empathy among young audiences should therefore be aware of this very early socialization process. By revealing how cultural narratives weave together aesthetic values and moral values, this study broadens the scope of body image research to include children's moral cognition and moral literacy. It therefore highlights the need for inclusive representations in which moral value of a given person is not determined according to her or his physique.

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