



# Challenging the Gaze: The Interplay of Stigma, Social Exclusion, Hope, and Resilience

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This study examines the interplay of stigma, social exclusion, hope, and resilience in R.J. Palacio's *Wonder* through the experiences of the protagonist, August Pullman. Drawing on Erving Goffman's stigma theory, the research analyzes how visible physical difference shapes social identity, peer relationships, and institutional responses within a school setting. August's craniofacial condition places him within what Goffman terms a "discredited identity," exposing him to bullying, marginalization, and internalized stigma. The study explores both overt and subtle forms of exclusion, including verbal harassment, social avoidance, and collective bullying practices such as the "Plague" game. At the same time, the paper highlights the transformative power of empathy, allyship, and supportive social structures. Through the roles of family, friends, and school authorities, the narrative demonstrates how resilience develops in response to adversity. August's journey from concealment and self-doubt to self-acceptance and social recognition reflects a shift from exclusion to inclusion. By situating the novel within broader discussions of body shaming, disability studies, and social psychology, this research argues that *Wonder* functions as both a literary narrative and a social commentary advocating inclusivity, emotional intelligence, and the dismantling of stigmatizing norms. Ultimately, the novel affirms that difference need not define limitation, and that collective kindness can challenge deeply embedded social prejudices.

**Keywords:** *Stigma; Social Exclusion; Bullying; Disability Studies; Resilience; Hope; Internalized Stigma; Identity Formation.*



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## 1. Introduction

American literature refers to the body of written or literary works produced in the United States and its preceding colonies. It encompasses a wide range of literary forms, including novels,

short stories, poetry, essays, plays, and more. American literature has a rich and diverse history that reflects the complex cultural, social, and historical development of the United States. It reflects the nation's history, culture, and social

issues, providing a rich tapestry of narratives that explore themes such as identity, race, gender, class, and the American Dream. It continues to evolve and adapt to the changing landscape of American society, making it a dynamic and important field of study in world literature.

The origin of American literature can be traced back to the early colonial period when European settlers first arrived in North America. Before the arrival of European settlers, Native American tribes across North America had rich oral traditions of storytelling, folklore, and mythology. These oral traditions were the earliest forms of literature in what would become the United States. These early forms laid the foundation for the rich literary tradition that would evolve over the centuries. As the United States continued to grow and change, so did its literature, reflecting the diverse voices, cultures, and experiences of the people who lived in the country. Over time, American literature has expanded to encompass a wide range of genres, styles, and perspectives, making it a vibrant and influential part of global literary tradition.

It is considered a part of the American people's culture, for it details not only the history of the American people but also reflects their creative thoughts and imaginations. American literature is the product of influences brought about by colonizers from Europe and the subtle native traditions of the early settlers of the United States. It is also a powerful defining tool of American characteristics such as liberalism and individualism.

The most important authors in American literature include **Mark Twain (1853–1910)**, known for his classic works *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Twain is considered one of the greatest American writers, renowned for his wit, humor, and social commentary. **Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)** is celebrated for her innovative and deeply introspective poetry, which explored themes of nature, death, and the human spirit. **Walt Whitman (1819–1892)** is hailed as the father of free verse; his *Leaves of Grass* is a seminal work in American poetry, celebrating democracy, individualism, and the human body. **Toni Morrison (1931–2019)**, a Nobel laureate and Pulitzer Prize-winning author, wrote novels such as *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, and *The Bluest Eye*, exploring African American experiences with

profound lyricism and emotional depth. **Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882)**, a leading figure of the transcendentalist movement, wrote essays such as *Self-Reliance* and *Nature*, emphasizing individualism, intuition, and the connection between humanity and nature. **Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849)** is recognized for his pioneering contributions to the genres of horror, mystery, and the macabre with works such as *The Raven*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, and *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Raquel Jaramillo Palacio was born on 13 July 1963 in New York City as the daughter of Colombian immigrants. Palacio attended Manhattan's High School of Art and Design and majored in design at the Parsons School of Design. She spent a year at the American University of Paris, traveling widely throughout Europe, before returning to New York. She currently lives in North Carolina with her husband Russell Gordon, an executive art director at Simon and Schuster Children's Books, and their two sons, Caleb and Joseph.

Palacio began her writing career as an illustrator, designing book covers for Paul Auster, Thomas Pynchon, and others. During the course of her career, she designed many hundreds of book covers, covering both fiction and nonfiction books. She also illustrated several children's books that she wrote herself. For the first two decades of her career, she wrote books at night after her job as a designer. She illustrated her early books, which were board books for children, published under the name Raquel Jaramillo.

She wrote many books including **Ride, Baby, Ride! (1998)**, **Dream, Baby, Dream! (1998)**, **Last Summer: A Little Book for Dads (2004)**, **Wonder (2012)**, **Auggie and Me: Three Wonder Stories (2014)**, **We're All Wonders (2017)**, **White Bird (2019)**, and **Pony (2021)**. Following *Wonder's* international success, she shared her real-life experience in an interview that inspired the novel. Along with her two sons, she once encountered a girl with a facial difference at an ice cream shop. She noticed her son reacting to the girl. Palacio panicked and quickly left the store to avoid an awkward situation, but afterward she regretted not handling it better. That moment stayed with her and made her reflect on kindness, empathy, and how people react to those who look different. She realized that instead of running away, it was a moment to teach compassion.

Palacio published several companion books to the novel. 365 **Days of Wonder (2014)** is a

collection of quotes or percepts that highlight kindness and goodness. *Auggie and Me (2015)* comprises three short stories written from the perspectives of August's friends. *We're All Wonders (2017)* is a picture book for younger readers that tells Auggie's story from his perspective. *White Bird (2019)* is a graphic novel that tells the story of Julian's grandmother when she was a young Jewish girl hidden from the Nazis by a family in France during World War II.

Palacio received the Christopher Award for *Wonder* in 2013 and the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award in 2014. *Wonder* was on *The New York Times* Best Seller list and the Texas Bluebonnet Award master list. It won the 2014 Maine Student Book Award and the Junior Young Reader's Choice Award for 2015. In Illinois, it won both the Bluestem and Caudill Awards in 2014.

August Pullman introduces himself to the reader. He is ten years old and feels normal, though he wishes he had a normal face. He declines to describe what his face looks like, insisting it is probably worse than whatever the reader imagines. August has been homeschooled because he has Treacher Collins Syndrome and has undergone 27 surgeries. When his parents decide to send him to Beecher Prep for middle school, he is frightened but agrees to try. At school, he meets Jack, Charlotte, and Julian. While Jack and Charlotte are polite, Julian is openly rude and attempts to make August feel unwelcome.

August experiences bullying and social exclusion, including the "Plague" game, in which students pretend he is contagious. A painful turning point occurs during Halloween when August overhears Jack making hurtful comments about him. Although devastated, August eventually reconciles with Jack. During a school nature retreat, classmates defend August from older bullies, marking a shift toward acceptance.

On graduation day, August receives the Henry Ward Beecher Medal for his bravery and kindness. Mr. Tushman emphasizes the value of character and empathy. The moment symbolizes August's journey from exclusion to inclusion and highlights the novel's central message of kindness. The theme of *Wonder* is closely tied to empathy, kindness, and acceptance. The novel challenges societal perceptions of disability and emphasizes the importance of looking beyond appearances. Through August's resilience and the support of his

family and friends, Palacio illustrates that inclusion and compassion can dismantle stigma.

This study aims to explore how *Wonder* portrays the strategies used by individuals with facial differences to cope with social stigma, including concealment, navigating bullying, and challenging societal norms. Through August Pullman's character, the novel highlights both the emotional and social struggles faced by those with visible differences while shedding light on their resilience and assertion of identity in a judgmental world.

## 2. Gaze to Grievance: Bullying, Stigma and Social Exclusion

Stigma is a negative response to human differences. These may be obvious visible signs or differences in behaviour towards stigmatized persons, or they may be more subtle actions of well-meaning people unaware of the potentially harmful effects of their responses. If these stigmatizing behaviors or responses are related to a health condition, we call this health-related stigma. Stigma can take on different faces. It may be very subtle, particularly in the early stages, for instance, when people start asking questions of a person's illness, look at them suspiciously, or make insensitive remarks that often do not match reality. At the other end of the spectrum is overt negative behaviour, usually called discrimination. Anticipated stigma is the perception, expectation, fear of discrimination, and the awareness of negative attitudes or practices in society. Sometimes, an action can be interpreted as stigmatizing, while the intention was completely different. When someone holds negative stereotypes about people with certain conditions, stigma is frequently perceived as a permanent mark or flaw inherent to an individual. Nevertheless, investigations into the lived experiences of those who face stigma, along with studies examining the efficacy of interventions aimed at mitigating stigma, have revealed that stigmatization is, in fact, a fluid social phenomenon. This phenomenon varies significantly among individuals and across different contexts, influenced by factors such as cultural background, the nature of the disease, an individual's social status or traits, and the progression of the condition itself.

The process of stigma that identifies individuals or groups with certain physical,

behavioural, or social characteristics as outside of what is normal or acceptable promotes the separation and isolation of people perceived to have undesirable characteristics. Through this process, the general population regards stigmatized persons and groups as different, inferior, and threatening to society, thereby justifying discriminatory actions against people based on their race, disability, gender, the disease they suffer from, etc.

Stigma offers an unusual excursion into the situation of persons who are unable to conform to standards which society calls “normal.” Quoting extensively from autobiographies and case studies, sociologist Erving Goffman analyzes the stigmatized individual’s feelings about himself and his relationship to normal and explains the strategies he employs in dealing with the refusal of others to accept him. The physically deformed, the ex-mental patient, the drug addict, the prostitute, the just plain ugly are constantly forced to adjust to their precarious social identities, precarious because their image of themselves must daily confront and be affronted by the image which others reflect to them. Dr. Goffman examines the alternatives that face the stigmatized individual: to display his disability or not to display it, to let on or not to let on, to lie, in each case.

Erving Goffman establishes several crucial preliminary conceptions from the foundation of his analysis. He begins by delineating the fundamental distinction between the “normal,” those who conform to societal expectations, and the stigmatized individual possessing attributes that create a discrepancy between a person’s “virtual social identity” and the assumptions others hold about their true attributes. Goffman categorizes stigma into physical deformities, character flaws, and tribal stigmas, highlighting its varied manifestations. A central preliminary idea is the importance of information control, as stigmatized individuals strategically manage the revelation or concealment of their stigmatizing attributes. These foundational concepts set the stage for Goffman’s exploration of how stigmatized individuals manage their spoiled identities in a world that often marginalizes and devalues difference. He also discussed in the book that “The term stigma, then, will be used to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is needed” (Goffman 3).

In *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, the protagonist August Pullman faces bullying due to his facial deformity, an experience that forms the emotional and social backbone of the novel. August has a deformed face caused by Treacher Collins Syndrome. Treacher Collins Syndrome is affected by chromosome 5, underdeveloped facial bones, especially the cheekbones and jaw.

Bullying remains a pervasive issue in school environments, with severe consequences for children’s mental health, self-esteem, and development. In *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, the protagonist August experiences bullying due to his facial deformity, which is central to the emotional and social fabric of the novel. August’s journey highlights how bullying manifests, its impact on both victims and perpetrators, and how empathy, understanding, and personal growth can lead to resolution. It delves into the nature of bullying in *Wonder*, examining its causes, effects, and potential for change, using August’s experience as a lens to explore these issues.

At the heart of the bullying in *Wonder* is August Pullman, a young boy with a congenital facial deformity. His appearance makes him a target for ridicule, social rejection, and fear. As August embarks on his first day at a new school, he faces not only academic challenges but also the social stigma of being perceived as “other” because of his appearance. The novel emphasizes how bullying is not an isolated event but a systematic process that reinforces social hierarchies based on physical appearance. August is keenly aware of how his appearance sets him apart. Though intelligent and curious, he experiences significant emotional strain due to the bullying he anticipates and faces. This emotional burden illustrates how bullying can go beyond physical violence, embedding itself in the day-to-day social dynamics that perpetuate exclusion and isolation.

The primary antagonist in August’s experience is Julian, a student who actively engages in bullying. Julian’s behavior is systematic and cruel, involving mocking August’s appearance, spreading rumors, and trying to isolate him socially. For Julian, August represents something uncomfortable and abnormal, and he uses his power within the school to reinforce societal ideals of “normal.” His bullying is not merely about physical harm; it seeks to assert dominance over someone deemed inferior.

Julian's behavior exemplifies Erving Goffman's notion of "spoiled identity," wherein perceived differences are regarded as sources of shame, thereby undermining an individual's societal value. His actions illustrate the broader power dynamics prevalent in educational settings, where deviations from the norm are frequently marginalized and condemned. The psychological impact on August is profound, as he grapples with a significant decline in self-esteem due to the internalization of the bullying he endures. Furthermore, Julian's attempts to ostracize August from social engagements exacerbate his sense of alienation, leading him to re-evaluate his worth and role within the school environment.

The emotional impact of Julian's bullying on August is immense. At first, August is deeply affected by the verbal abuse. His self-worth plummets, and he internalizes the belief that he is unworthy of friendship or acceptance. Julian's cruel remarks, combined with his attempts to prevent others from befriending August, amplify the isolation August feels. The damage caused by Julian's bullying extends beyond August; it affects his emotional state, his relationship with his family, and his ability to trust others.

Beyond overt bullying, *Wonder* also explores more subtle forms of bullying, such as social exclusion and avoidance, which can be equally damaging. Many of August's classmates are hesitant to interact with him, not because they openly ridicule him, but because they are uncomfortable with his appearance. This subtle form of bullying is often overlooked but leaves deep emotional scars. The act of avoiding someone due to their differences communicates the message that they are unworthy of attention or interaction, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and loneliness.

The Halloween incident becomes one of the most significant events that highlights both the cruelty of bullying and the potential for reconciliation and empathy. On Halloween, August, dressed in a ghost costume, overhears a conversation between Jack and some of his classmates. He hears Jack say, "I mean, yeah, if I looked like him, honestly, I think I'd kill myself" (Palacio 77). This statement devastates August, who considered Jack a friend. Hearing someone he trusted say something so cruel makes him feel deeply betrayed. He leaves immediately, crying, and avoids Jack for a while after this incident.

Soon after, the "Plague" game begins. Julian spreads the idea that touching August is contagious. Students pretend they must "wash their hands" if they touch him. This game reinforces the idea that August is someone to be feared or avoided rather than included. The Plague game deeply affects August, though no one directly insults or hurts him physically. Instead, he confronts a silent but powerful form of rejection. It increases his feelings of isolation and damages his self-worth.

Charlotte's role in August's social challenges highlights passive bullying. She is polite but emotionally distant. Her reluctance to form a genuine friendship with August reinforces his sense of isolation. Through subtle superiority and social exclusion, Charlotte contributes to his marginalization. Her behavior reflects how indirect bullying operates psychologically, creating an environment where the excluded person feels invisible and undervalued.

The psychological toll of bullying on August is considerable. As Goffman's theory suggests, individuals marked as "different" often experience emotional struggles marked by self-doubt, isolation, and depression. August internalizes stigma, becoming self-conscious about his appearance. His desire to be "normal" drives much of his emotional conflict.

Bullying in *Wonder* is a multifaceted issue that highlights how physical differences can lead to social exclusion and emotional harm. However, through empathy, personal growth, and the support of others, it becomes possible to overcome the destructive effects of bullying. The novel ultimately sends a message of hope, illustrating that kindness, understanding, and the willingness to look beyond superficial differences can create positive change.

### **3. Exclusion to Inclusion: Navigating Difference and Finding Belonging**

August Pullman's journey is shaped by both the intense challenges he faces due to his physical appearance and the profound emotional growth he experiences as a result of the support and hope provided by his family, friends, and school community. Born with Treacher Collins syndrome, August has undergone numerous surgeries that make him the target of stares, whispers, and eventually bullying when he begins attending Beecher Prep. Despite the cruelty and exclusion he

faces, he ultimately emerges stronger, more confident, and socially accepted by his peers. This transformation is largely driven by the love and support of his family, the loyalty of true friends, and the hope that he learns to hold onto even in moments of profound vulnerability. The novel's exploration of human connection and emotional resilience underscores its central message that hope and support can empower individuals to overcome even the most painful social challenges. At the beginning, August is acutely aware of his physical differences and how others perceive him. His decision to attend a mainstream school for the first time is met with both excitement and apprehension. His fear stems not only from the potential difficulty of adjusting academically but also from the certainty that his classmates will react negatively to his appearance. Palacio establishes August's emotional vulnerability early in the novel, illustrating how years of being treated differently have made him self-conscious and guarded.

August frequently wears an astronaut helmet to hide his face, symbolizing his desire to shield himself from the judgment of others. This defensive mechanism reflects the emotional toll that years of social isolation have had on him. The bullying August faces at Beecher Prep is both direct and indirect. Julian, the main antagonist among his classmates, engages in overt bullying by making cruel remarks about August's face, leaving notes in his locker, and organizing a social campaign to isolate him. Julian's creation of the "Plague" game, in which students avoid touching August or anything he has touched, reflects the toxic social environment he faces. Beyond Julian's open hostility, August also experiences more subtle forms of exclusion, such as classmates whispering behind his back or changing seats to avoid sitting near him. This social isolation reinforces his sense of otherness and deepens his emotional wounds.

The psychological impact of bullying on August is evident through his internal dialogue and moments of vulnerability. His sadness when he overhears Jack speaking negatively about him during Halloween illustrates how even well-intentioned friendships can fracture under social pressure. The emotional pain he experiences marks a turning point in his understanding of human relationships. However, this moment becomes not a point of defeat but a foundation for

growth. His ability to overcome betrayal and rebuild his friendship with Jack reflects the resilience that emerges from hope and support. One of the most consistent sources of strength for August throughout the novel is the unwavering support of his family. His parents, Isabella and Nate Pullman, create a nurturing and accepting home environment where August feels valued and loved despite the challenges he faces outside the home. Their decision to enroll him in Beecher Prep reflects their belief in his capability to succeed socially. Isabel comforts him when he comes home upset, reassuring him that he is strong enough to face these challenges. Nate reinforces this by treating him as a normal child rather than defining him by his differences. This balance between protection and empowerment helps August develop both emotional security and independence.

August's sister Via also plays a critical role in building his resilience. She treats him as a typical younger brother rather than someone to be pitied. Though she struggles with feeling overshadowed by his medical needs, her loyalty remains constant. Their sibling bond serves as a source of mutual strength and reinforces the theme that familial love provides a foundation for personal growth and emotional resilience.

The novel portrays the Pullman family as a unit grounded in unconditional love, which becomes a source of hope for August. Even when he feels rejected by classmates, the emotional safety provided by his family allows him to maintain a sense of identity and self-worth. This internal foundation becomes critical as he gradually experiences acceptance within his peer group.

Friendship also plays a crucial role in August's transformation. Jack's decision to defend August publicly marks a turning point in his social experience. After initially joining in teasing due to peer pressure, Jack feels deep regret and guilt. His decision to punch Julian for insulting August demonstrates courage and loyalty. Jack's growth reinforces the novel's theme that kindness requires bravery and moral conviction.

Summer Dawson's friendship with August is entirely voluntary and unprompted. Her decision to sit with him at lunch reflects her innate kindness and emotional intelligence. She treats him as a normal child, forming the symbolic pairing of "Summer and August." Her consistent

loyalty gives him the confidence to trust others and rebuild strained friendships.

The pivotal turning point occurs during the school nature retreat. When older students from another school mock and attempt to intimidate August, classmates Henry, Miles, and Amos step in to defend him. This moment marks a shift from exclusion to inclusion. Their intervention demonstrates moral growth and signals a broader change in the school's social dynamics. August is no longer defined solely by his appearance but recognized for his character and resilience.

After the trip, the atmosphere at school changes. Students treat August with respect and warmth. Julian's influence declines as others reject his behavior. August gains a growing sense of belonging and confidence. The experience teaches him that he is not alone and that his quiet courage inspires others.

Mr. Tushman, the school principal, also plays a vital role in August's journey. He creates opportunities for social integration and takes decisive action against bullying. His emphasis on kindness fosters an environment of empathy and inclusion. By confronting Julian's behavior and upholding school values, Mr. Tushman reinforces August's sense of safety and belonging.

August's transformation is not only about gaining acceptance but also about learning self-acceptance. Through family support and meaningful friendships, he begins to understand that his identity is not defined by his face. His intelligence, humor, and kindness become central to how he sees himself. He learns to let go of pain and embrace his individuality.

Graduation day becomes the symbolic culmination of his journey. It represents the end of a transformative year. Mr. Tushman awards August the Henry Ward Beecher Medal for courage and kindness. The medal symbolizes recognition of inner strength over outward appearance. Mr. Tushman quotes Henry Ward Beecher: "Greatness lies not in being strong, but in the right using of strength... He is the greatest whose strength carries up the most hearts" (Palacio 304).

August is shocked and overwhelmed. His parents, Jack, Summer, and Via are visibly proud. His mother whispers, "You really are a wonder, August. You are a wonder" (Palacio 310).

This moment signifies August's complete transition from exclusion to belonging. He is no longer defined by stigma but by resilience,

kindness, and courage. The novel ultimately affirms that acceptance begins with empathy and that belonging is achieved when individuals and communities choose compassion over prejudice.

#### 4. Conclusion

*Wonder* as a title was given by the author, inspired by the song "Wonder" by Natalie Merchant, which is about someone who is unique and special. The song and the book share a message that people who might seem different are full of beauty, strength, and worth. August's journey shows that anyone can overcome insecurities and grow into a better person with the right support and mindset.

R.J. Palacio presents a compelling exploration of stigma through the experiences of August Pullman, whose craniofacial differences make him a target of social exclusion. Erving Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* provides a useful theoretical framework to understand the social reactions August faces and how he navigates his identity. Goffman defines stigma as a mark of social disgrace that sets an individual apart, often leading to discrimination and social avoidance. *Wonder* vividly portrays these aspects through August's interactions at school and in society, illustrating the struggle of a stigmatized individual in a normative world.

*Wonder* provides a nuanced portrayal of disability, difference, and social acceptance. The novel illustrates that while stigma creates barriers, hope fosters change, and resilience ensures that marginalized individuals can move beyond societal labels. August's journey is not one of erasing difference but of embracing it, and in doing so, he challenges both his self-perception and the biases of those around him. The novel suggests a broader social lesson: stigma can be dismantled when individuals choose kindness over prejudice, when institutions advocate for inclusivity, and when those facing marginalization find the strength to define themselves beyond societal expectations.

Goffman categorizes stigma into three types: physical deformities, character blemishes, and tribal stigmas associated with race, religion, or nationality. August's facial anomaly falls into the first category, marking him as "different" from social expectations. His peers react to this visible difference with avoidance, whispering, and

outright bullying, particularly through Julian's actions. August's experience reflects what Goffman calls a "discredited identity," where stigma is immediately visible and shapes social interactions before personal engagement occurs.

The "cheese touch" game that isolates August at school exemplifies the dehumanization that often accompanies stigma. Goffman also discusses "passing," where individuals attempt to conceal their stigmatized identities to blend in with the dominant group. While August cannot physically hide his difference, he tries to minimize its impact through humor, intelligence, and kindness. His childhood use of the astronaut helmet symbolizes a form of self-imposed invisibility, a coping mechanism to avoid negative scrutiny. As the novel progresses, August shifts from avoidance to self-acceptance, particularly as he gains allies like Summer and Jack, who challenge stigmatizing attitudes.

Another key Goffman concept in *Wonder* is stigma management. August's parents and Mr. Tushman's graduation speech highlight the power of character over appearance, reinforcing that true acceptance requires dismantling societal biases. By framing kindness and empathy as strengths, the novel suggests that stigma can be countered through education, awareness, and meaningful relationships.

The narrative aligns with Goffman's theories while extending them into a hopeful resolution. While stigma influences social identity, it is not an insurmountable barrier. Beyond external discrimination, stigma also operates internally. Internalized stigma occurs when individuals absorb societal prejudices and believe in their own inferiority. In *Wonder*, August experiences this through his reluctance to attend school, his self-deprecating humor, and his struggle with self-acceptance. His journey involves dismantling not only bullying but also his own internalized doubts.

August's internalized stigma is reinforced through direct and indirect interactions. Julian embodies explicit bullying, while even well-meaning individuals like Jack initially struggle with peer pressure. When August overhears Jack saying he was forced to befriend him, it confirms his deepest insecurities. Yet, his transformation begins with small affirmations: making Jack laugh, Summer's voluntary friendship, and Via's

unwavering love. These moments gradually weaken his internalized stigma.

Hope plays a crucial role in overcoming stigmatization in *Wonder*. August's resilience is evident in his decision to attend school despite the risk of rejection. Over time, he gains confidence, demonstrating what Goffman describes as "secondary gains" from stigma management. His experiences help him build emotional strength and adaptability.

Central to his hope is familial support, especially from his mother, who reassures him of his worth. Via's unwavering love reinforces that identity is shaped not only by stigma but also by community response. Resilience in *Wonder* is not simply endurance but active reclamation of identity. August gradually learns to navigate social spaces without allowing stigma to define him.

A pivotal moment occurs during the nature retreat when classmates Amos, Henry, and Miles defend him from older bullies. This act marks a shift from exclusion to acceptance, illustrating Goffman's concept of normalization, where a stigmatized individual becomes integrated into the dominant group. This transformation reflects the power of solidarity and collective moral growth. August's friendships with Summer and Jack demonstrate how breaking social barriers fosters inclusion. Summer's choice to sit with him disrupts stigma through individual agency. Jack's moral growth highlights the possibility of changed perceptions. The applause August receives at graduation symbolizes the triumph of hope over prejudice.

The stigmatization August faces parallels real-world issues such as body shaming. Just as he is judged for his facial difference, individuals in society experience discrimination based on appearance. Goffman's stigma theory applies similarly to body shaming, where individuals are labeled with a "discredited identity." Social media intensifies unrealistic beauty standards, reinforcing exclusion and psychological distress. The impact of body shaming includes low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. August's struggle with self-acceptance mirrors these experiences. Real-world advocacy movements promoting body positivity and self-love echo the support August receives from his allies. Combating body shaming, like combating stigma, requires shifting cultural attitudes toward acceptance beyond physical appearance.

The novel also mirrors real-world discrimination faced by individuals with disabilities. Many encounter barriers in education, employment, and public life due to systemic biases. In some cultures, stigma restricts access to opportunities, reinforcing exclusion. *Wonder* contributes to this conversation by humanizing disability and promoting empathy.

Media representation plays a crucial role in shaping public perception. *Wonder* offers a nuanced portrayal of disability, presenting August as a complex individual rather than reducing him to his condition. Through disability studies, the novel critiques societal attitudes and advocates inclusivity and allyship.

August's journey reflects broader global struggles with stigma. Disability studies emphasize that inclusion is not about erasing difference but valuing diversity. The fight against stigma requires continued advocacy in literature and real life to build a more equitable society. *Wonder* serves as a compelling case study of stigma theory in action, illustrating both the social consequences of difference and the possibility of change. Through August's experiences, Palacio critiques rigid social boundaries and advocates a world where difference is embraced. The novel demonstrates that while stigma may shape identity, it does not have to define it.

The graduation ceremony, where August receives the Beecher Prep medal for courage, symbolizes a societal shift toward recognizing inner strength over outward appearance. Though challenges remain in real-world contexts, growing advocacy movements and awareness campaigns suggest that the hopeful vision presented in *Wonder* is achievable.

Future research may apply Erikson's psychological development theory to examine August's emotional growth and Via's identity conflicts. Such interdisciplinary approaches can deepen understanding of resilience, identity formation, and moral development.

Ultimately, the novel acts as a mirror to contemporary society, highlighting both its flaws and its potential for change. August's story encourages readers to reflect on their biases and foster empathy. While progress has been made toward inclusivity, continued efforts are needed to challenge discrimination and embrace diversity. By doing so, society can move closer to the world

envisioned in *Wonder*—one where everyone, regardless of difference, is valued and accepted.

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