The Importance of Physical Appearance in Palacio's Novel Wonder

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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Jadranka Zlomislić, Assistant Professor

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Abstract

Social prejudices, bullying, family support, and self-acceptance are only some of the topics covered by R. J. Palacio's novel *Wonder* and its movie adaptation. In today's world people are constantly striving for perfection and anything that falls short is deemed often as undesirable and worthless. Unrealistic standards for external beauty dictated through the media are idealized by society and as a result inner beauty is far less valued. There is cruelty in this world aimed at people who are different because of their imperfections, and as a result many are discriminated against, rejected and hurt. R. J. Palacio raises her voice for those who deviate from the created image of the so-called normal appearance. This paper covers not only the life of August 'Auggie' Pullman, the main character of the novel, but also cases of young Nathaniel Newman and Katie Atkinson who express what it is like coping with the Treacher Collins syndrome. Analysis of these cases of craniofacial disorders, reveals the society's prejudices, rejection, and bullying that make life very challenging for the child and the family that is frequently the only source of comfort and acceptance. Therefore, books and movies like *Wonder* are crucial in raising society's awareness and support. To lift the stigma, society needs to be more educated about disorders and disabilities affecting children, so the wider community can focus not on the external appearance or imperfections but on meeting the person hidden within. Moreover, it is worth noting that various types of media encourage people with disorders to raise their voices and accept themselves as they are.

Keywords: social prejudices, Treacher Collins Syndrome, physical appearance, raising awareness

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Introduction

This paper deals with the well-known children's novel *Wonder*, written by R. J. Palacio, which was published in 2012. Because of its distinctive plot, *Wonder* gained a lot of attention upon its publication and remained on the bestseller list for several years in a row. The central topic of the novel is the craniofacial disorder of the main character, mandibulofacial dysostosis or the Treacher Collins syndrome. The author also highlights topics such as social rejection, bullying, self-acceptance, physical appearance, family support, and other issues encountered by sufferers of these disorders. *Wonder* focuses not only on younger children in their developmental years when it is very important for them to fit in and have friends but on their families, who are frequently their sole source of support. By incorporating the point of view of Auggie's parents, sister, friends, and some other adults, Palacio provides the reader with a wider picture of coping with the disorder. The aim of this study is to show that physical appearance plays an enormous role in today's society, and as a result, individuals with the Treacher Collins syndrome, especially children, face severe challenges and struggle just to fit in and be accepted.

The first chapter takes a closer look at society's idealization of physical appearance and the unrealistic standards for external beauty dictated through the media that has led to a devaluing of inner beauty. Moreover, the chapter discusses the challenges and struggles for social acceptance, and the rejection and prejudices experienced by individuals because of their imperfections. The second chapter deals with the Treacher Collins syndrome in general and presents the syndrome through Auggie's perspective as well as the perspective of his family, schoolteachers, pupils and their parents. The third chapter provides a broader perspective through the stories of Nathaniel Newman and Katie Atkinson who have also been diagnosed with Treacher Collins. Finally, the concluding chapter addresses the need for the society to be better informed and educated about disorders like the Treacher Collins syndrome and highlights the value of novels and movies like *Wonder*, as well as other media types, that raise awareness about coping with disorders and give those suffering from the disorder and their families the opportunity to make their stories heard.

1. Physical Appearance as an Important Factor in Society

"Physical characteristics can include a variety of things. Hairstyles and facial features play a big role but aren't the main ones. Physical characteristics are what you see with the naked eye. They encompass anything you can describe about a person or group of people, just on sight" ("Examples of physical characteristics"). When seeing a person for the first time, the first thing that anyone will notice is their physical appearance. Characteristics such as face, eyes, ears, hair, etc. have an immediate impact on our first impression about a person. As about a lot of things, such as countries, languages, and nationalities, there are also a lot of stereotypes created about physical appearance. People are stereotyped according to their height, weight, haircut, hair color, clothes, and a lot more. Today, in a world of fashion, social networks and media, physical appearance has become extremely important. Society has created images of ideal physical appearance and a great majority, especially women strive to achieve this look. This craze about achieving the look approved by society has resulted in a great number of cosmetic surgeries. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS), in 2018 Americans spent more than $16.5 billion on cosmetic plastic surgery and minimally invasive procedures and in 2019 the amount increased to 18.1 million on cosmetic procedures in addition to 5.9 million on reconstructive procedures ("Plastic Surgery Statistics"). These statistics confirm the real power of beauty. Unfortunately, nowadays, it is known that beauty opens a lot of doors in life. People, who are considered as more attractive or beautiful, have higher chances in getting a job, being promoted, and even being more accepted in society. So, the question arises – what happens with those, whose appearance differs from what the society accepts as beautiful or normal?

1.1. Social Acceptance, Rejection and Prejudices

"A relatively small but consistent body of research suggests that distinctive physical characteristics of children and adults are reliably related to social acceptance" (Kleck et al. 1). Social acceptance is very important for mental health. Every person needs acceptance from family, relatives, and friends to be happy and to feel accepted and secure. However, when someone's external appearance differs, in one way or another, it often comes to social prejudices or even social rejection. Puhl and Peterson state that "some features of physical appearance have become viewed as undesirable and deviant. Individuals who possess these devalued physical attributes or characteristics are often stigmatized because of their 'spoiled identity' and are vulnerable to social rejection and even overt forms of discrimination" (588). Precisely this topic is highlighted in the novel *Wonder* because it presents the problem which occurs frequently all around the world. Both children and adults with physical disabilities are confronted with social prejudices, rejection and even bullying. Although, they are in so many ways ordinary people just like the ones without disabilities, they must fight hard against prejudices in order to maintain their self-esteem, to make friends, and just to feel and be seen as normal human beings. Consciously or unconsciously, society treats people with stigmas differently and looks at them differently. Mostly, persons with disorders do not even get the chance to present themselves as whole persons. Children with disabilities are often cut off from the circle of "normal" children. That is one of the main reasons why people do not know how to behave and how to approach stigmatized children. Sometimes, even when people want to approach them, they are afraid of the unknown and then they rather choose to avoid them or to look the other way.

Auggie Pullman represents all those children, whose disabilities are the first thing people notice and he is proof that people judge not knowing what is hidden under the surface. He is the representative of those "cut off" children at whom others are staring frightened, shocked, or disgusted for different reasons. Auggie states that people are the ones who do not let them behave and feel as ordinary as they are: "If I found a magic lamp and I could have one wish, I would wish that I had a normal face that no one ever noticed at all. I would wish that I could walk down the street without people seeing me and then doing that look-away thing. Here's what I think: the only reason I'm not ordinary is that no one else sees me that way" (Palacio 10). His words point out that the solution to coping with his disability is to be found not only in medical help that could improve his appearance but more importantly in educating society in learning to cope with the imperfections of others.

2. Treacher Collins Syndrome

To explain problems with facial abnormalities and society's judgmentalism, Palacio decided to present in her novel the craniofacial syndrome, a rare genetic disorder also known as the Treacher Collins syndrome (TCS). Thus, *Wonder* centers on August who is diagnosed with mandibulofacial dysostosis, this rare congenital disorder of craniofacial development.

"Recessive genetic disorders occur when an individual inherits the same abnormal gene for the same trait from each parent" ("Treacher Collins Syndrome"). In their article, Katsanis and Cutting claim that: "[a]bout 60% of probands with TCS have the disorder as the result of a *de novo*gene mutation. Each child of an individual with TCS has a 50% chance of inheriting the mutation" (1). The Treacher Collins Syndrome affects head and face and includes features such as hypoplasia of the zygomatic bones and mandible (prominent nose, downward slant of the eyes, jaw muscles abnormalities), external ear abnormalities (absent, small, rotated or malformed ears), lower eyelid abnormalities (notching, partially or completely absent eyelashes), cleft palate abnormalities (with or without cleft lip), and preauricular hair displacement (Katsanis and Cutting 2). As by other syndromes, physical appearance is not the biggest concern. This syndrome often includes ophthalmologic defects, airway abnormalities, delayed motor or speech development and conductive hearing loss (Katsanis and Cutting 2). Treacher Collins is not curable, but there are some procedures that can be done to improve the appearance and the quality of life. Some of the possible procedures are surgical intervention for the airway, placement of the tracheostomy, gastrostomy, craniofacial reconstruction, nasal reconstruction, external ear reconstruction, external auditory canal and middle ear reconstruction, orthodonture or other surgeries (Katsanis and Cutting 7). These procedures and surgeries require a lot of sacrifice from both the person with the disorder and their family. The disorder also causes a lot of pain, and demands staying in hospitals, risks, waiver and of course a lot of time and money. When a child is diagnosed with TCS, there is a great possibility that the help of different doctors or specialists will be needed. Some of these people included in the treatment of a person with TCS are "[p]ediatricians, pediatric ear, nose and throat specialists (pediatric otolaryngologists), pediatric dentist, pediatric nurse, plastic surgeon, speech pathologists, audiologists, ophthalmologists, psychologists, geneticists, and other healthcare professionals" ("Treacher Collins Syndrome").

2.1. Auggie and Treacher Collins

The Treacher Collins syndrome causes eating, hearing, speaking, and many other problems that make life difficult. Surgical options are available and Auggie goes through numerous surgeries to have a life with less difficulties. These surgeries and long stays in hospitals stop him from going to school until the age of ten: “People think I haven’t gone to school because of the way I look, but it’s not that. It’s because of all the surgeries I’ve had. Twenty-seven since I was born” (Palacio 11). The jaw reconstruction surgery helps to improve Auggie’s appearance: “They had taken a piece of bone from my hip bone to insert into my chin to make it look more normal, so I was hurting in a lot of different places” (Palacio 45). However, despite the surgery certain problems remain as Auggie explains: “I hate the way I eat. I know how weird it looks. I had a surgery to fix my cleft palate when I was a baby, and then a second cleft surgery when I was four, but I still have a hole in the roof of my mouth. And even though I had jaw-alignment surgery a few years ago, I have to chew food in the front of my mouth” (Palacio 43). To improve his speaking skills, he has been going to speech therapy since he was little and because his hearing was worsening, he needs to wear hearing-aids. He sees a lot of different doctors, who are trying to enable him to have the best quality of life he could possibly have. Surgeons are helping to improve his appearance, and life possibilities, while therapists and specialists are helping him to be able to speak better and to improve his hearing.

However, even after a great number of surgeries, these abnormalities have not been completely corrected. Of course, all these anomalies affect self-esteem, and it is very hard for a child to accept the fact that he looks different: “I won’t describe what I look like. Whatever you’re thinking, it’s probably worse” (Palacio 11). Moreover, August is ashamed of his appearance. “‘Why do I have to be so ugly, Mommy?’ I whispered. ‘No, baby, you’re not . . .’ ‘I know I am’” (Palacio 50). It is hard for him to understand why he has to look like that, but at the same time he is questioning himself why people are not able to see him, as he sees himself – just as an ordinary kid with an extraordinary face. This syndrome, or so to say, his physical appearance was making his life path difficult. Already as a little boy, he felt how adults and children can be mean. Freak, Monster, Freddy Krueger. E.T, Mutant, Rat Boy, Orc (Palacio 61, 146), were only some of the names children have called him in the past. He sees that people looking at him are shocked, disgusted, or even scared.

He is particularly aware of the reactions of the children. They are not familiar with his syndrome, so they are curious, they are speculating, and they fear the unknown. That is one of the reasons why Auggie experiences unpleasant situations, such as how it feels to be avoided or how children do not want to touch him as if he is contagious. “They would sneak peeks at me from behind their notebooks or when they thought I wasn’t looking. They would take the longest way around me to avoid bumping into me in any way, like I had some germ they could catch, like my face was contagious” (Palacio 51). Children also question his intellect, which has nothing to do with his syndrome. They underestimate his knowledge and his cleverness. Clearly, it is very hard for a little boy to go through something like that. Fortunately, August is able to handle his situation bravely. Dealing with Treacher Collins for ten years makes his character stronger. He is able to endure a lot more than ‘ordinary’ children.

2.2. Auggie’s Family

Of course, Auggie’s mental strength would not have been enough, if it were not for his supportive family. His mother, father, and his sister Olivia are there for August no matter what, with unconditional love, encouragement, and protection. It is known that family plays a huge role in the life of every person: “The family is one important element in the process of forming one’s social identity, especially with regard to the child’s social identity. The family is an informal educational institution that plays a role and is responsible for the growth, development and education of children in the family” (Rananda et al. 1). Parents teach their children how to behave, what is wrong and what is right, what the real values in life are and that even though life is not always easy, there are ways to overcome those hard times. The role of the parents is significant, but it is also important to recognize the individual characteristics of the child. Every child has his/her own character, beliefs and opinions, and cannot be perfect or exactly the person his/her parents want him/her to be. Although it is not always the case, but it is very helpful for a child to have caring, understanding parents, who provide love, protection, encouragement, and the assurance that you will never be alone.

Being a parent is not easy but being a parent of a child with a disability is harder in so many ways. “Auggies” require parental sacrifice to a much greater extent. Werth and Oseroff explain that “[f]amilies with children with special needs face both the normal pressures and tensions of family life and, in addition, adjustment to the presence of the child with a disability. Such families usually require assistance in order to reorganize their lives toward positive adaptation” (qtd. in Heiman 161). August’s case shows the real importance of having a stable, supportive family. His parents sacrifice a lot in order to give Auggie everything he needs. His mother even gives up on being a children’s-book illustrator. As Auggie says: “I haven’t seen her draw anything in a long time. I think she’s too busy taking care of me and Via” (Palacio 11). She even homeschools him.

Auggie's parents have been there for him through all of his surgeries and recoveries, through every awful situation he has lived through because of his condition.

However, Auggie is not their only child, they have Olivia too. Taking care of both of them is really hard at times. Olivia is a reasonable girl, so that makes their parenting job easier, but the demanding care her brother's condition requires is the reason why Olivia sometimes feels neglected. Olivia: "If I wanted Mom and Dad to watch me play soccer, I knew that nine out of ten times they'd miss it because they were busy shuttling August to speech therapy or physical therapy or a new specialist or a surgery" (Palacio 63). Furthermore, Auggie is not the only one who is "defined" by his syndrome. Faliks research shows that "[a] child's disability is a triadic experience, involving three-way interactions among the child who experiences the dysfunction, the family that is affected by it, and the external environment where the disability is manifested" (qtd. in Heiman 160). In other words, the parents and the sister are also affected; they too, in a way, need to deal with Auggie's disability. It is not just that it is difficult for them to hear all those awful things about their son and little brother, but that they are also seen differently because of his syndrome. Olivia mentions a visit to her grandmother without Auggie when she finally felt free from the judgement of others. She says: "No one stared at Grans and me when we went to town to buy groceries. No one pointed at us. No one even noticed us" (Palacio 65). Although Olivia loves Auggie and is a supportive sister, she expresses her annoyance at the reactions of others as she says: "I'm always going to be the sister of a kid with a birth defect: that's not the issue. I just don't always want to be defined that way" (69).

2.3. Confronting School

"Don't you think you're ready for school, Auggie?" Mom said. "No," I said. "I don't, either," said Dad. "Then that's it, case closed," I said, shrugging, and I sat in her lap like I was a baby. "I just think you need to learn more than I can teach you," Mom said. "I mean, come on, Auggie, you know how bad I am at fractions!" "What school?" I said. I already felt like crying" (Palacio 13). After years of homeschooling the time came for Auggie to start going to a real school. They decided that the fifth grade, a new beginning for all of the kids and not just for Auggie, is the best time for him to finally confront school. However, this is not an easy decision for Auggie's parents. They are aware that it will be a hard time for Auggie, because children can be mean. Despite the uncertainty, Auggie attends fifth grade at Beecher Prep.

2.3.1. Teachers

When it comes to teachers, it is expected from them to be professional and to treat all pupils fairly and with respect. This novel provides situations where teachers are doing their best not to react differently towards Auggie, but still some of them do react to Auggie's face: "She hadn't noticed me yet. "Now, the first thing I want everyone to do is stop talking and . . . "She noticed me." . . . put your backpacks down and quiet down." She had only hesitated for a millionth of a second, but I could tell the moment she saw me. Like I said: I'm used to it by now" (Palacio 35). August does not take reactions like these to his heart, it is important to him that they treat him nicely. Teachers do try hard to make Auggie feel like he was being treated normally, to adapt school activities to him or to make other kids join him in certain activities. Even though they are trying, it is clear that in most cases teachers are not prepared enough or educated enough to know how to react, how to treat these children and what to say or do in certain situations.

> Mrs. Atanabi, the teacher, tried to make Ximena Chin be my dance partner. Now, I've never actually seen someone have a "panic attack" before, but I have heard about it, and I'm pretty sure Ximena had a panic attack at that second. She got really nervous and turned pale and literally broke into a sweat within a minute, and then she came up with some lame excuse about really having to go to the bathroom. Anyway, Mrs. Atanabi let her off the hook, because she ended up not making anyone dance together. (Palacio 57)

2.3.2. Pupils

Friends are the second family. A life without a friend is a poorer life. Friends are especially necessary for children like Auggie, who need extra support, protection and encouragement. It is not easy for children with disorders to gain true friends. They are usually rejected before they can even show what they have to offer as a friend. Children, already in middle school want to become popular, want to feel important, and they choose their friends according to the degree of their popularity. Soon after school begins, the groups are created. Smart ones, popular ones, creative ones, and so on. This type of "social system" makes it almost impossible for "Auggies" to make friends. August differs a lot from the rest of the pupils, and he comes as a huge shock for children who have not seen a person like him before. They do not know what to think, what to say or how to behave around him, so it is easiest for them to make fun of him and even bully him. Auggie experiences some severe bullying in school and it is not easy for him at all. According to Ali and Ayuningtyas, August experiences physical bullying, social bullying, psychological bullying, cyber bullying, and verbal bullying (174). In addition, some of the children are afraid of him or even just being close to him. Clearly, school is a hard place for August. His going through every-day-bullying is not harmless. “The effects of bullying have an impact on the psychology of the victim. Like what happened to Auggie, he experienced psychological problems that became rebellious to his parents and stubborn because of bullying” (Ayuningtyas and Ali 172).

Even though August knows that his chances of being accepted in school are small, that does not stop him from trying to show them who he is. He knows that these children are not used to someone like him, that they do not know anything about his condition and that prejudices are cruel, but he hopes that it will get better when they get used to his face. He feels lonely until a brave girl, named Summer, comes to his table at lunchtime and starts a conversation. It is a real wonder for him to find a friend so fast. Except with Summer, Auggie spends his time with Jack Will. However, it is not completely beneficial for them to be friends with Auggie. The majority of their class cannot understand why they would want to be nice to Auggie. “Some kids have actually come out and asked me why I hang out with “the freak” so much. These are kids that don’t even know him well. If they knew him, they wouldn’t call him that. “Because he’s a nice kid!” I always answer. “And don’t call him that” (Palacio 87). Summer really shows how a true, honest friend needs to behave. She does not let them drag her away from Auggie. Although Jack Will, almost throws his friendship with Auggie away because of popularity, he comes to his senses, and realizes what values a true friend has. Eventually, Jack ends up being bullied, and he loses all of his other school “friends,” only because he chooses to be Auggie’s friend. “That’s when practically nobody was talking to us, and Julian had started leaving notes in our lockers. The notes to Jack were stupid, like: You stink, big cheese! And Nobody likes you anymore! I got notes like: Freak! And another that said: Get out of our school, orc” (Palacio 146)!

With all those mean things, bullies only make Jack and Auggie’s friendship stronger. They do not let anything ruin their friendship. That makes them realize that malevolence does not have a point. Every day children become more and more accustomed to Auggie’s face, so the circle of bullies becomes smaller and smaller. The final test of kindness, friendship and habituation happens on the trip where Jack and Auggie are physically maltreated, and those ex-bullies save both of them. This situation reveals the beauty and benefits of friendship, and the futility of being evil. From that day on, these children show a beautiful picture of how kindness and inner beauty should always be more important than the external appearance of a person. Auggie’s first year of school helps not only him, but also his classmates to be better as persons, to mature, and to overcome some of their fears or prejudices. Auggie’s biggest accomplishment and happiness in his fifth year of school or maybe even in his whole life is when he receives an award on graduation day. “We put our arms around each other's shoulders, and for the first time I can remember, I wasn't even thinking about my face. I was just smiling a big fat happy smile for all the different cameras clicking away at me" (Palacio 212). August finally feels completely accepted and completely normal. It is a day when others finally see him in the way he sees himself. This award and this day are a huge step forward in society. Kindness begins with one child and then another, until kindness and awareness finally defeat prejudices and discrimination.

2.4. Parents of Other Children

Not only children are in the habit of staring, showing prejudices or simply not knowing how to react in a situation when they are confronted with a person with a disability. Usually, parents are those who teach their children about kind behavior, about how it is not acceptable to insult others or to make fun of them. Children often consider parents as role models, and they adopt their attitudes towards people, their thoughts and actions. Julian is the meanest of all the children in school, and he thinks that his actions are cool. His mother is probably the reason for his behavior. "I heard that Julian's mom actually Photoshopped August's face out of the class picture when she got it. She gave a copy to a couple of the other moms" (Palacio 114). Without knowing anything about his syndrome, she is convinced that Auggie is not 'normal' enough to go to the regular school. She cannot accept the fact that children like Auggie belong in a school where her son goes, and she considers Julian to be better and more valuable than Auggie.

> I wonder if Jack's unexpectedly violent behavior might have been a result of too much pressure being placed on his young shoulders. I am speaking specifically of the new child with special needs who both Jack and Julian were asked to "befriend." In retrospect, and having now seen the child in question at various school functions and in the class pictures, I think it may have been too much to ask of our children to be able to process all that. Certainly, when Julian mentioned he was having a hard time befriending the boy, we told him he was "off the hook" in that regard. We think the transition to middle school is hard enough without having to place greater burdens or hardships on these young, impressionable minds. (Palacio 116)

She obviously has strong prejudices toward Auggie. Although he has no intellectual difficulties, she believes that he should not go to a regular school but to a school for children with special needs. She discriminates against him only because of his appearance. On the other hand, there is Jack's mom, who is trying to raise her sons to be kind. When Jack tells her about the children staring and reacting badly when they see Auggie for the first time, she says: "Guys, I have to tell you, I'm really disappointed by what I'm hearing here. I mean, honestly, he's just a little boy—just like you! Can you imagine how he felt to see you running away from him, Jamie, screaming??" "It wasn't a scream," argued Jamie. [. . .]. "Come on, Jamie!" said Mom angrily. "I honestly thought both my boys were more sympathetic than that" (Palacio 102). She wants her children to be considerate, and not discriminative.

3. Examples of Treacher Collins Syndrome in the Media

Palacio did write a fictional novel with fictional characters, but her story was inspired by real-life stories, so her story is credible. Families experiencing similar situations to that of the Pullman family, usually do not speak up about their lives or about the unfair situations they are going through. After *Wonder* was published and became so popular, people with disabilities started sharing their stories. In addition to the *Wonder* novel and its movie adaptation, there are a lot of other examples of "Auggies" in other types of media. For the purpose of this paper the following sections will focus on news articles written about two young adults diagnosed with the Treacher Collins Syndrome. ABC News has published several articles about the Newman family and their son Nathaniel, who suffers from TCS. The other article that covers the story of Katie Atkinson and her life with TCS is found on the CTV News site.

3.1. Nathaniel Newman

The novel *Wonder* encouraged the Newman family to share their "Wonder" story with the world. Among others, ABC news has published the story of the Newman family in several different articles and videos. Their story is about their son, Nathaniel, who was born in 2004 and diagnosed with Treacher Collins syndrome. His diagnosis came as a huge shock to his parents, but they decided to give their best to offer Nathaniel a good life. According to the ABC news article, Nathaniel underwent around ten surgeries until the age of one and around 54 by the time he was eleven (Dooley et al.). When he became aware of how he looks, he started feeling social prejudices and rejection. "He could clearly vocalize, 'I don't like the staring. I don't like the name calling," Russel said. "At that age we're going to birthday parties and other kids see him and scream and leave. He knows it was about him" (Dooley et al.). As well as Auggie, Nathaniel hears a lot of ugly words about himself, which certainly hurt his feelings. Luckily, he also has strong and loving parents and a younger brother who loves and protects him. In spite of his facial abnormalities which a lot of people consider as ugly or even scary, Nathaniel says that he is content with his appearance, because it makes him stand out (Dooley et al.). Their story also shows how hard it is to deal with this disorder, not only because of appearance but because of a significant number of surgeries and recoveries. Furthermore, a great challenge for Nathaniel comes when his father finds a job in a new city, so Nathaniel has to start his middle school in a completely new environment. In an ABC report, Nathaniel's parents say that he wrote a letter for his schoolmates explaining how he looks, but also adding how ordinary he really is. He wanted to prepare them, because he wanted to avoid the situation where everyone stares at him. In his letter he also mentions the novel *Wonder*: “Like, ‘Hey, you might have read ‘Wonder’ now. Well, I’m a kid just like Auggie Pullman” (Dooley et al.). Last year in an interview, Nathaniel said how now when he has gone through around 70 surgeries and after his Tracheostomy tube is gone, for the most part he lives a normal life (ABC News). In the same interview Nathaniel’s mother sends a beautiful message to the society: “Live your normal! Don’t let your life circumstances or how others perceive you determine how you choose to live your life. “Normal” is how you choose to define it” (ABC News).

3.2. Katie Atkinson

Katie Atkinson is a girl living with TCS. Some parts of her story were published in the media. In her article, Sheril Ubelacker writes how Atkinson said that she has not had an easy childhood. She remembers how she was bullied, stared at and teased because of her appearance. As years passed, her surgeries improve her appearance and reduce the bullying. For CTV News, “she related one incident in which her father had taken her into a coffee shop and the barista behind the counter -- not realizing the child in the stroller was his -- exclaimed ‘Oh, look at that really ugly baby. They should put it out of its misery’” (Ubelacker). That is only one out of many horrible stories Katie remembers. Almost every day she deals with people staring at her, and she confesses how her reaction to the stares is not always the same. Sometimes she stares back, answers back, and sometimes she smiles or looks away (Sunshine). Katie is as brave as Auggie and Nathaniel. As a member of AboutFace[1], Katie has asked people running this organization to organize a charity fashion-show, in which the models will be girls with facial abnormalities. “The show, which will feature fitness, casual, and evening wear, aims to promote beauty through diversity, uniqueness and confidence by increasing awareness of facial differences” (Sunshine). Katie wants to send a message to the world that everyone should feel beautiful and that a “normal looking” face is not what makes a person beautiful. Her confidence sends a great message to everyone – love yourself and fight for your goals and wishes. Also, like Auggie, Katie wants to break free of stereotypes and social prejudices.

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[1] AboutFace was founded in 1985 to provide support to members of the facial difference community across the country and to address barriers and misconceptions by building awareness and acceptance of facial differences.

4. Raising Empathy

People are not aware enough of how the life of a person with a disability looks like. That is the main reason why it is important to have books and movies like *Wonder*. The story of August Pullman has been either read or seen by an enormous number of people and it has helped to raise the level of empathy among them. According to Bouton, cognitive, affective, and behavioral are among the three main components of empathy. Lam, Kolomitro and Alamparambil explain as follows: *Cognitive* empathy "refers to one's ability to take the perspective of others, and see the world through his or her perspective"; affective empathy "involves experiencing the feelings of another person"; and behavioral empathy "involves verbal and non-verbal communication to indicate an understanding of an emotional resonance with the other person" (qtd. in Bouton 1).

A high level of empathy is necessary so that people are able to understand the needs and problems of others. Persons with disabilities are not integrated enough in society. Mostly, they are going to special needs schools or have jobs where they are not seen a lot. So to say, they are hidden and invisible for "ordinary" people. That is the reason why it is necessary to be familiar with stories like the ones presented in this paper. "Classroom teachers are in a unique position to help meet young adolescent needs around discussions of empathy, diversity, social skills, and moral development" (Bouton 5). Children should be educated about disorders and how to successfully interact with individuals suffering from the disorders. Nathaniel and Katie are only two of many young people out there who were inspired by Palacios story and because of it they have decided to share their lives and their stories with the public. If one story follows with another, acceptance, empathy, kindness and awareness will rise to the desired level.

Conclusion

It is very difficult to encourage people to accept those who stand out, because society is narrow-minded, because of the imposed expectations of “the look” which almost everyone is trying to achieve. Because of this world full of rejection and prejudices, Palacio decides to focus on a real problem that many individuals and their families and friends are facing. Palacio uses a fictional character, whom she “diagnoses” with mandibulofacial dysostosis, his parents, sister, friends and his social environment, to present what coping with this particular disorder means for all those involved. By including the different points of view in the book she provides a broad perspective in a very realistic way. The Treacher Collins Syndrome is not even one of the most severe syndromes and still it comes with so many hardships. Even after undergoing such a high number of surgeries, children with TCS are still exposed to social rejection and discrimination. The negative public reactions cause harmful repercussions to their health, especially their mental health. No one can be happy if he/she feels lonely, rejected and alienated. So, they need to be brave not only in the hospital, but also in their own social environment. They need to fight against prejudices in order to show that beauty really comes from the inside. This is the reason why books or movies like *Wonder* are worthwhile for the society.

To conclude, this paper has shown that society is not educated enough about people with disorders which adds to the hardship of individuals as they struggle to be accepted. In addition to Palacio’s story, the articles about Nathaniel Newman and Katie Atkinson have also contributed to raising awareness to the need of familiarizing society with such stories in order to raise the empathy level among people and to try to improve the social quality of life for all “Auggies” around the world.

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