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## Reaching Epiphany in R. J. Palacio's *Wonder*: A Social Disability Study

By

Dr. Asmaa Mansour Ahmed Abdelmonem

Lecturer in English Literature, English Department, Faculty of Arts,  
Zagazig University

### Abstract

This paper presents the dilemma of a society dealing with disability through the captivating account of R.J. Palacio's *Wonder*. The story tells of a ten-year old child with an extreme facial deformity that invokes both panic and fear. August Pullman, the protagonist of the story, has been home-schooled. However, at the age of ten he agrees to enter a private middle school. The novel, which covers one year of August's life, features how community stigmatizes him. Overcoming the stigma attached to him is considered one of the challenges that faces him. This study elucidates the primary three emotions that emerge from stigmatization: fear, pity, and disgust. Although August is always subject to social rejection and isolation, the writer suggests that disability can lead to some positive consequences.

August is able at the end of the school year to transcend the stigma imposed by society, and to reach a reconciliation with his state. Furthermore, he is able to set his peers free from the shackles of stereotyping and under-estimating him. The novel is not an ordinary tale telling the predicament of a child with a disability; instead, it is a tale of child with a disability who is able to change the perception of his peers to his disability. Palacio suggests that disability can motivate people change their reaction and perception of difference. Furthermore, August's disability enlightens his able-bodied peers to his potentialities. His facial deformity is not a personal limitation but a way to reaching epiphany.

**Key Words:** disability, epiphany, disgust, fear, touch, stigma.

## الملخص

يتناول هذا البحث مشكله رؤية المجتمع للمعاق ، وذلك من خلال دراسة رواية "المعجزة" لار . جاي. بالاسيو. تحكي الرواية قصة ولد يبلغ من العمر عشر سنوات ويعاني من تشوه شديد بالوجه ، مما جعله مصدرا للخوف والذعر من كل من يراه. يدعي بطل الرواية اوجست بولمان وقبل بداية الاحداث كان يتلقي التعليم بالمنزل ، و تبدأ أحداث القصة بموافقته الالتحاق بمدرسة خاصة. تغطي الرواية احداث سنه من حياه البطل ، كما انها توضح وصمة المجتمع لذوي الاعاقه ، كما توضح كيف ان التخلص من هذه الوصمه اصبح احد التحديات التي واجهها البطل . يدرس البحث ثلاثة مشاعر تنتج من وصم صاحب الاعاقه وهي : الخوف ، والشفقه ، والاحساس بكون الشخص مقزز.

بالرغم من كون اوجست عرضه لرفض المجتمع والانعزال ، فان الكاتبه توضح انه قد يكون هناك نتائج ايجابية للاعاقه، فبنهايه القصة نجد ان البطل استطاع ان يتغلب علي وصمه من قبل المجتمع وان يصل الي التصالح مع حالته ، بالاضافه الي ذلك فلقد استطاع ان يخلص اصدقائه من القيود التي جعلهم يضعوا صاحب الاعاقه في صوره نمطية ومن تقليل قدراته. ان هذه الروايه ليست روايه تعبر عن ماساة صاحب الاعاقه وانما هي روايه تعبر عن قدرته علي تغيير رؤية الآخرين له ، واستيعابهم لمعني الاختلاف بالاضافه الي ذلك فان اعاقه اوجست كانت مصدر للتنوير لاصدقائه لرؤية امكانياته ، وبهذا اصبح تشوه الوجه لديه ليس قصورا شخصيا وانما وسيلة لادراك قيمته واستيعاب معني الاختلاف.

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When it was published in 2012, R.J. Palacio's *Wonder* won great recognition. The novel has been a New York Times bestseller for over five years. It has received many national and international rewards. Additionally, it is one of Time magazine 100 Best Young Adult Books of All Time, and USA Today's Top 100 bestsellers. Furthermore, the book inspired Random House to start an anti-bullying campaign, called Choose Kind, with a site where people can share their experiences. The story tells of ten-year old August Pullman, who was born with an extreme facial deformity caused by an anomaly in his DNA. He describes himself at the beginning of the novel, "My name is August ... I won't describe what I look like. Whatever you're thinking, it's probably worse" (*Wonder* 10). Because his face required many reconstructive surgeries, Auggie has been homeschooled. However, at the age of ten, August's family decide to let him experience going to school instead of home- schooling. He enters fifth- grade at a private middle school in Manhattan, where he has different confrontations with other students.

The reader of *Wonder* is introduced at the outset of the novel to a kid, describing his facial deformity in detail. Soon Auggie, as he is called, recounts how his presence invokes subliminal unease and panic. The first encounter with Auggie, a kid with a visible disability, makes the non- disabled people have many contradictory and unexplainable feelings; these feelings may include pity, fear, repulsion, or under- estimation. These feelings are aroused after a stare at Auggie. In fact, *Wonder* is a work that manifests how

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Auggie is always subject to social rejection and isolation; nevertheless, he is able to reach an epiphanic moment of social acceptance. Furthermore, this study shows that the major character, deemed "disabled," can serve as a catalyst in transforming others.

*Wonder* is a work which is replete with instances of social rejection and isolation; therefore, it is inevitable to present some of the elements that led to reaching epiphany. At the beginning of the novel, Auggie has two choices either to accept his stigma and live away from social unacceptance, or to continue to fight for more integration into a non-stigmatized community. He agrees to experience the transition and integration into the school system. At school he is confronted with stares that can be the outcome of curiosity, fear, disgust, hostility. His response is pretending not to see. Stares are not the only obstacle that faces Auggie, avoidance of touching him is another hostile response to his deformity. This negative attitude can stem from a feeling of unjustifiable fear which is a reaction that results from an inability to identify with Auggie. Auggie manages to suppress the feelings that may be aroused after encountering new people. These feelings may include sadness, embarrassment, and inferiority. When he faces unacceptable attitudes from his peers, he chooses to continue struggling for acceptance. He accepts Jack's apology, and this helps Jack to have an epiphanic moment and to realize that Auggie can be better as a friend than many others. In addition, he is able to change the negative attitudes of many of his peers.

Auggie's attitude towards himself and his peers shapes social response, leading ultimately to eliminating the perception of inferiority imposed on him by the non-stigmatized people. Truly, there are always moments of despair and sadness; however, Auggie manages to overcome them. Auggie has always been surrounded with supportive people such as his family, his headmaster, and his teacher, Mr. Brown who has always drawn the attention of the boys to the importance of being kind to people. He teaches the students

precepts that help them interact with each other. These precepts gradually help to break the barriers down between Auggie and the other students. Mr. Brown's first precept is "when given the choice between being right or being kind, choose kind" (27). He is able to recognize how hard it is for Auggie to deal with the other boys' negative attitudes; therefore, his words have been a source of illumination. Through a series of revealing insights, Auggie's peers manage to reach an epiphanic moment of learning "to be kind." Additionally, the headmaster's speech at the graduation ceremony can also be a step towards reaching epiphany. Both the headmaster and his teacher treat Auggie in a way that gives him confidence in his abilities and paves the way for him to believe in himself regardless of his disability.

A close reading of Palacios' *Wonder* suggests that disability as epiphany is applicable to this novel. According to *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, the word "epiphany" primarily denotes "the festival which commemorates the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles in the persons of the Magi. More generally, the term denotes a manifestation of God's presence in the world" (261). Although the term has religious connotations, it has been extensively used by many writers who gave it a literary connotation. For example, James Joyce "used it in his novel *Stephen Hero*, part of the first draft of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*" (261). According to *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms*, James Joyce used the term to describe "the artistic revelation of the inner radiance of an object or event" (143). Similarly, R. J. Palacio's *Wonder* portrays a protagonist who manages to reach an epiphanic moment of feeling quite normal, something he has always wished for.

Major questions that led to this study include: what is the difference between medical and cultural disability? Does the understanding of the meaning of stigma offers a better reading of the novel? What are the criteria regulating the relationship between

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a person with disability and a non-disabled person? Since the reaction of deformity is directly related to the sense of vision, a detailed analysis of how a stare can evolve a human difference into a stigma is presented. Moreover, moving subtly in and out of different characters' perspectives while exploring Auggie's life enlightens our perception of Auggie's journey towards epiphany. This study can also be considered an exploration of the value of the person with disability and how people respond ethically to difference. This is mirrored through the attitudes of Auggie's peers towards deformity.

In order to analyze the work in light of disability theory, a close consideration of the meaning of disability and the difference between medical and cultural disability should be highlighted first. One of the enlightening definitions of the field of disability studies is that it "examines not only the ways disabled people are marginalized, stigmatized, and oppressed, but also the ways that all bodies fall short of culturally, politically, and economically-driven bodily ideals" (Hagood 387). Taylor Hagood adds that this field of study "challenges some of the most basic assumptions made about human bodies and their connection with ideology" (387). Many of the influential theorists of disability studies are Americans, and "the dividing lines they created between the perception of normality and abnormality were mainly attached to the American society" (387). The emergence of disability studies as a field of literary criticism coincided with the civil rights movement of the 1960s, but it began to flourish impressively in the 1990s. It had the same concern as other fields such as race and gender studies (387). Earlier, disability has been regarded as a medical field that is interpreted as a "a problem to be fixed and eugenics movements had seen it as a flaw to be weeded out of the human race," while the "civil rights-based social sciences discipline saw people with disabilities as marginalized, oppressed in multiple ways by what was termed the 'abled'" (387). According to Lennard Davis, "disability is not

a stigmatising embodiment of an individual but a social portal that leads to an investigation of exclusionary practices in society at large. (*Disability and Social Theory* 4). Therefore, this study concentrates on presenting Auggie in a social milieu that greatly affects his behavior and perception of himself. Further, Ato Quayson argues that “there are various shifts that take place in the meanings that might be assigned to the disabled character, serving to place them within a wide spectrum of the typology of disability representation” (87).

It is crucial at the beginning of this study to elucidate the difference between medical disability and disability as a cultural concept. In an illuminating online lecture, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, the significant disability studies scholar, illustrates the difference between two principal concepts: medical disability and cultural disability. This clarification is essential for the conceptualization of disability studies and its relation to the field of literary criticism. According to Thomson, medical disability is “an interpretation of bodily variations as medical conditions to be diagnosed and treated.” She asserts that this tendency has been the dominant perception of disability for a long time. According to the previous view, a person with disability is regarded as sick and in need of curing; however, this definition is a limited one. She adds that a cultural understanding of disability entails that “these human variations that we think of as disease and disability have always been part of the human experience. Additionally, people with disabilities have produced “a distinctive culture and contributed to the general culture in part through and because of these qualities that we think of as disabilities.” She asserts that the cultural understanding of disability also encompasses the belief that there are some “positive aspects of the variations we think of as disabilities” (“Building a World that Includes Disability”). In fact, the dominance of such an idea can eliminate disability discrimination.; it is through R. J. Palacio’s novel that her illumination of disability as a cultural concept can best be expressed.

John Quike added a significant illumination to the difference between disability as a medical condition and as a social one. He states that, "the medical definition locates the cause of the 'problem' in the individual due to their medical condition. In contrast, the social model of disability addresses the barriers to full participation in society caused by the practical, environmental, attitudinal or administrative framework of that society" (11). Therefore, this study, one that can be categorized as social, focuses on the ability of a child with a disability to achieve not only personal transformation but the transformation of those around him as well. The protagonist is ultimately able to transcend social rejection and achieve social acceptance. Quike further illustrates his notion by giving an example of "a wheelchair user trying to access to a stepped entrance of a building" (11). By the medical definition, the person is disabled by a medical condition that makes using a wheelchair necessary. By the social definition, the same person is disabled because of the absence of ramps or lifts which allow the person to proceed unhindered. In case that lifts, or ramps are present, the person is not "socially disabled" although his/her medical condition remains the same (11). Furthermore, Lennard Davis argues that "We can say that the social model provides one definition of disability—society disables a person with disabilities when it fails to create a barrier-free environment. (*Beginning with Disability* 7). From this perspective, Auggie would not be regarded as socially disabled if his peers were aware of the meaning of difference and how much it could add to them. Erving Goffman supports the previous view, he maintains, "society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories." He adds, "social settings establish the categories of persons likely to be encountered there" (*Stigma* 11). To put it simply, society determines how a person with a disability is perceived by the able-bodied.



To analyze the novel in light of a disability studies perspective, a serious consideration should be given to the meaning of “stigma.” An important, compelling new way to understand stigma is accomplished by Goffman. In his work *Stigma*, Goffman defines a stigmatized person as “the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (1). In other words, stigmatized people are those that are not fully accepted socially. They strive hard to fit in the society that denies them their humblest rights of being treated as equal human beings. Goffman identifies three types of stigma:

First there are abominations of the body - the various physical deformities. Next there are blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty, these being inferred from a known record of, for example, mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, alcoholism, ... Finally, there are the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion.” (13)

A brief clarification of the distinction between these three types is pivotal to understanding the motives of Auggie as a child who can be described as stigmatized. Goffman identifies stigma as either personal or as the outcome of being one of a particular group. A person with a physical stigma is one that suffers from a physical deformity; similarly, being one of a particular race, religion, or nation can also stigmatize a person. Lerita Coleman Brown argues in a stimulating extension of some of Goffman’s insights about stigma that “we normals develop conceptions, whether objectively grounded or not, as to the sphere of life-activity for which an individual’s particular stigma primarily disqualifies him. Ugliness, for example, has its initial and prime effect during social situations, threatening the pleasure we might otherwise take in the company of its possessor” (66). She adds that stigma mirrors culture and society (147). This view is connected to her definition of stigma as “not primarily a property of individuals as many have conceptualized it to be but a humanly constructed perception, constantly in flux and legitimizing our negative responses to human differences” (227).

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Undoubtedly, society and culture determine whether a person with disability is visible or not. As for Thomson, she elaborates on this notion by identifying the presence of a person with a disability with giving long stares. She believes that disability can be everywhere, it depends on searching for it. She exemplifies, "if there is a manifesto of critical disability studies in the United States, it would be 'Disability Is Everywhere, Once You Know How to Look for It.'" ("Critical Disability Studies: A Knowledge Manifesto" 11). She defines disability "not as a physical defect inherent in bodies but rather as a way of interpreting human variation" (11). Thomson elaborates on her definition of the study of disability during the twenty first century. She argues, "the definition I offer is that critical disability studies are an interdisciplinary academic field that expands the understanding of disability from a health science perspective to consider it as a civil and human rights issue, a minority identity, a sociological formation, a historic community, a diversity group, and a category of critical analysis in culture and the arts" ("Critical Disability Studies: A Knowledge Manifesto" 12). She briefly illustrates the difference between "impairment" and "disability." She comments, "however, there is also a need for research to consider those living with disability which incorporates the social model of disability that, regardless of impairment, the disability occurs via interactions with inaccessible environments and attitudinal barriers" (54). This notion mirrors Auggie's disability which is closely connected to how society reacts to his condition.

The main confrontations between the protagonist of *Wonder* and the other characters take place at school. This was one of the reasons for choosing such a novel to be tackled. According to Goffman, "public school entrance is often reported as the occasion of stigma learning, the experience sometimes coming very precipitously on the first day of school, with taunts, teasing, ostracism, and fights" (*Stigma* 45). At school, Auggie is away from the domestic protective circle he has always had, namely his family.

However, his type of stigma and the different encounters with boys and girls give rise to many moral experiences. In fact, some of his friends are unable to respond ethically to his disability. When being home-schooled, Auggie's disability is invisible. Confrontation with the outside world of school peers enables him to clearly change himself and unconsciously change those around him. Transformation is accomplished after one year of successfully handling the violent responses of many of his peers.

Offering significant insights into the difference between "disability," and "impairment," Kathy Boxall illustrates that "impairment" connotes a "functional limitation" whereas "disability" connotes a "socially imposed restriction" (199). She adds that "in social model discussion, the term 'disabled people' is therefore used because this recognizes that people with impairments are disabled by society's responses to impairment, that is by (socially imposed) barriers to their full inclusion in the mainstream of society" (199). It is society's response to disability that renders Auggie to feel stigmatized and socially rejected. Dan Goodley argues convincingly in his book *Disability Studies: an interdisciplinary introduction* that "disability studies are a broad area of theory, research and practice that are antagonistic to the popular view that disability equates with personal tragedy" (preface xi). This view justifies the success achieved by many characters with disabilities including the protagonist of *Wonder*. Goodley adds that disability scholars present the dilemma not of the person with a disability but of society. He illustrates, "while we may identify people as having physical, sensory, cognitive or mental health impairments, disability studies place the problems of disability in society," (Preface xi) therefore, the main argument of this study will be on how society firstly sees, and secondly, chooses to stare.

A stare creates, whether intentionally or not, a reciprocal relationship. To simplify, the interaction between a person with a

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disability and a nondisabled person leads to a variety of tensions to be discussed and identified. Goodley argues that people with disabilities always face societal discrimination. He exemplifies, "disabled people have been hated, made exotic, pitied, patronised and ignored. Disability also evokes admiration, curiosity, fascination and sympathy" (Preface xi). He adds that disability studies "respond to these acts of political and cultural life" (Preface xi). Through a thorough reading of R. J. Palacio's *Wonder*, Goodley's remarks will be further illustrated. The novel presents a dialogue between disability and community; it shows how the appearance of a disabled character precipitates mixed feelings. Ato Quayson states that, "contradictory emotions arise precisely because the disabled are continually located within multiple and contradictory frames of significance within which they, on the one hand, are materially disadvantaged, and on the other, have to cope with the culturally regulated gaze of the normate" (18).

In a brilliantly argued and engaging book entitled *Staring: How we Look*, Thomson simply defines staring as:

an ocular response to what we don't expect to see. Novelty arouses our eyes. More than just looking, staring is an urgent eye jerk of intense interest... We stare when ordinary seeing fails, when we want to know more. So staring is an interrogative gesture that asks what's going on and demands the story. (3)

A stare can be a reaction to what is not expected to be seen. It investigates the 'staree' and asks silently and violently about his/her background. She adds that curiosity is the motive behind a stare, a notion that is applicable to Palacio's *Wonder*. Auggie always avoids looking people in the eyes. He avoids their stare. When he first meets Mr. Tushman, the headmaster, he greets him, "Hi,.. I mumbled , dropping my hand into his hand while I looked down at his feet"(8). Even though Auggie expects to be treated with respect by the headmaster, he acts unconsciously; he is used to avoiding the

stares of those who see him for the first time by looking down. During his tour at school, he hides behind his mom, “I sort of hid behind Mom as I walked. I know that sounds kind of babyish of me, but I wasn't feeling very brave right then” (9). Thomson maintains that the process of staring is a complicated one. It usually happens between unfamiliar people. In other words, a stare is the first response to noticing a person with a disability.

According to Thomson, “an encounter between a ‘starer’ and a ‘staree’ sets in motion an interpersonal relationship, however momentary, that has consequences. This intense visual engagement creates a circuit of communication and meaning-making” (*Staring* 3). She masterfully explains the mechanism of staring: “staring bespeaks involvement and being stared at demands a response. A staring encounter is a dynamic struggle— ‘starers’ inquire, ‘starees’ lock eyes or flee, and starers advance or retreat; one moves forward and the other moves back” (3). Thomson explains that “triggered by the sight of someone who seems unlike us, staring can begin an exploratory expedition into ourselves and outward into new worlds” (6). Auggie has always had a good relationship with his sister. She describes how she sees people look at him; she says, “I knew he didn’t look exactly normal, but I really didn’t understand why strangers seemed so shocked when they saw him. Horrified. Sickened. Scared. There are so many words I can use to describe the looks on people’s faces. And for a long time, I didn’t get it/ I’d just get mad. Mad when they stared. Mad when they looked away” (52). Having a facial deformity is considered in the eyes of society a stigma that entails either staring or looking away. Hence, Auggie in his society is either an invisible object or a trigger for a long stare. The major problem is how people stare, then the following reaction differs from one person to another, leaving Auggie unable to react.

Necessarily, there are multiple responses following a stare; the one which marks the first encounter between a person with a

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disability and a non-disabled person. Commenting on the aftermath of a stare, Thomson argues, "once triggered, a stare can yield its bearer myriad responses, from curiosity to confusion, attraction, discomfort, even repulsion" (*Staring* 7). She defines the role of the 'starees' as "reluctant participants in their starers' visual search for something new" (7). Moreover, "people become more or less stareable depending on the context" (7). During the first days at school, Auggie faces obvious stares from some students while others stare and move their eyes quickly. Julien, one of his classmates, once hints at Auggie's similarity with one of the characters of Star Wars whose face was deformed after being burned. Auggie cries when he goes home. He bursts into tears in the arms of his mother, asking her, "why do I have to be so ugly, Mommy?" His supportive mother kisses him all over his face. Auggie describes, "She kissed me all over my face. She kissed my eyes that came down too far. She kissed my cheeks that looked punched in. She kissed my tortoise mouth. She said soft words that I know were meant to help me, but words can't change my face" (35). In this scene, Auggie is confronted with a kind of power that is best described by Michel Foucault. According to him, to describe the notion of "power" as a physical act is a limited explanation. He illustrates, "It is no longer the body, with the ritual play of excessive pains, spectacular brandings in the ritual of the public execution; it is the mind or rather a play of representations and signs circulating discreetly but necessarily and evidently in the minds of all." (*Discipline and Punish* 101). This illustration is undoubtedly applicable to what Auggie faces in this situation. Here, Auggie refuses to be overpowered by Julien's remarks. Hence, choosing to continue struggling for acceptance paves the way to reach an epiphanic moment of recognition. The most important feature of Foucault's theory of power is that for him power is not a force which can be owned by the State, a social class or particular individuals. Instead, it is a relation between different individuals and groups. Thus, the term power refers to sets of relations between individuals.

Auggie accepts facing a new experience by going to school which allows him to confront many staring situations. He describes meeting his teacher for the first time; he says, “when I looked up at her, Mrs. Garcia's eyes dropped for a second. It was so fast no one else would have noticed, since the rest of her face stayed exactly the same... Hi, I said quietly, giving her my hand, but I didn't want to look at her face, so I kept staring at her glasses which hung from a chain around her neck” (9). Avoiding other people’s eyes is a reaction to their first stare which holds different meanings. For Mrs. Garcia, it is a reaction of surprise.

There is a difference between a “stare” and a “gaze.” Thomson exemplifies the word ‘gaze.’ She states that “the stare is distinct from the gaze, which has been extensively defined as an oppressive act of disciplinary looking that subordinates its victim” (*Staring*11). This definition suggests the presence of an oppressor and an oppressed. The oppressor inflicts his stares over the oppressed, reducing his ability to react as a normal human being. Auggie summarizes what happens during the first month of school:

being at school was awful in the beginning. Every new class I had was like a new chance for kids to "not stare" at me. 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. (36)

Auggie describes the reaction of some of the boys who notice him for the first time. The first reaction Auggie receives is always a stare that is followed by avoidance of touching him. He adds, “in the hallways, which are always crowded”; he says, “my face would always surprise some unsuspecting kid who maybe hadn't heard about me. The kid would make the sound you make when you hold your breath before going underwater, a little "uh!" sound. This happened maybe four or five times a day for the first few weeks”

(36). Auggie admits that they stare at him in a mean way. A related explanation is provided by Ning Yu, who states that “the face is the focus of human interaction;” people stare using the eyes located on their faces, thus, they stare by their faces at others faces (9). Thus, being deformed makes Auggie subject to staring and reflects the effects of it.

Thomson declares the importance of the face during interaction. If the disability is in the face, then it is most obvious. When being with Charlotte and Julien, Auggie notices that, while Charlotte is talking, Julien is staring at him “out of the corner of his eye.” Apparently, Auggie is used to this. He says, “this is something I see people do a lot with me” (15). Additionally, Julien once asks him, “what’s the deal with your face? I mean, were you in a fire or something? (16). Thomson adds, “our faces engage in many information-gathering activities. Our eyes stare; our ears hear; our noses sniff; our tongues taste...The cluster of sensory features that evolved to keep us fed also make us known to the world... We seek knowledge by staring at faces and learn to read very minor variations with great accuracy” (97). During lunch time, Auggie is confronted with the stares of many students at the same time. “I could tell I was being stared at without even looking up. I knew that people were nudging each other, watching me out of the corners of their eyes. I thought I was used to those kinds of stares by now, but I guess I wasn’t” (29). Hence, a stare can have a colonizing effect that determines how Auggie reacts to it. Kids stare at Auggie not only because of his facial deformity but also because of the way he eats. He eats “like a tortoise, if you’ve ever seen a tortoise eating like some prehistoric swamp thing” (*Wonder* 29). Auggie underwent many surgeries to fix his cleft palate when he was a baby. Auggie’s endurance of these hard moments paves the way for reaching an epiphanic moment.



Indeed, the stare is a close companion to the stigmatized. Considering the previous illuminations, a stare can be considered a force exercised and received consciously or unconsciously. Georgina Kleege, who draws on her experience as a person with a disability, asserts that “a look can be a provocation. A look can speak volumes (124). She elaborates, “eyes are more central and active, than all the other facial expressions. Eyes glow, twinkle, sparkle, shimmer, smoulder, and flicker, projecting emotions the viewer readily understands... All the wrinkles and crinkles of emotion occur only to funnel meaning into the eyes” (128-9). Kleege who is basically blind wrote that, “in the language of the sighted, where seeing is believing, the eyes must be the focal point of every expression” (129). This justifies the importance of discussing the influence of a stare on the protagonist of *Wonder*.

Goffman states in his book *Stigma* that, “By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often un-thinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents” (14). In fact, staring connotes that Auggie is not perceived as human. Gregory Castle stresses that, “the stigma arises not so much for being disabled but for failing to support and realize a bodily norm” (291). Auggie does not like school events that included parents. The worst one is the first festival: Thanksgiving Sharing Festival. This is the first event he meets all the parents face to face. At this stage Auggie knows very well that his face draws the attention of anybody who sees him; however, it is hard to deal with many people looking at him at the same time. He describes his feelings:

It’s not that I care that people react to me. ...I’m used to that by now. I don’t let it bother me. It’s like when you go outside and it’s drizzling a little. You don’t even open your umbrella. You walk through it and barely notice your hair getting wet. But when it’s a huge gym full of parents, the drizzle becomes

like this total hurricane. Everyone's eyes hit you like a wall of water. (130)

The stare of the non-disabled person is considered the first step towards a process that ultimately leads to either recognition or unrecognition. To describe the emotional relationships between a person with disability and a non-disabled person, Bill Hughes states that, "in the phenomenological tradition emotions are the means by which consciousness apprehends objects and attaches value (or disvalue) to them" (67). Hughes examines the three emotions, he believes, are considered "building blocks of the emotional infrastructure of ableism. It is these emotions, as they collect in the non-disabled imaginary, that contribute, therefore, to the social distance between disabled and non-disabled people." These three emotions are fear, pity and disgust (68). Hughes explains the process of feeling fear after the encounter with a disabled person. He illustrates:

In the context of such an encounter, non-disabled persons are most likely to attempt to resolve the element of fear manifest in the challenge of difference by erasure, by putting clear emotional, physical and social distance between themselves and the source of this kind of visceral identity shock. This can be achieved by an act of reclassification and that dehumanizes and objectifies the aberrant body. (69)

He adds, "Fear encourages 'flight or fight' " (69). The first reaction that Auggie gets is a stare, mostly followed by fear. People fear that which is different. Therefore, fear is one of the responses a person with disability encounters. It is a feeling that stigmatizes him.

Auggie's peers fear touching him because they believe that having a different face stigmatizes him. When Auggie first meets Julien, who accompanies him along with other kids on the school tour, Julien acts as if "he was afraid (he) might accidentally touch him as (he) passed by him" (*Wonder*13). Hence, stigmatization is linked to perceiving Auggie as different. It is as if by touching

Auggie, Julien may acquire the stigma. Therefore, at the beginning of the school year most of the students distance themselves from Auggie. Noticeably, fear is important to a discussion of how and why stigma abides.

Auggie notices that most of the kids avoid touching him. He notices that at the dancing class when Ximena is asked to be Auggie's partner, "she got really nervous and turned pale and literally broke into a sweat within a minute" (*Wonder* 43). The second incident is in Auggie's science class when the students have to make an experiment. Auggie narrates, "Now, there are eight kids in the elective, and seven of them were squished together on one side of the plate while one of them-me- had loads of room on the other side" (43). Ms. Rubin notices this and asks two of them, Tristan and Nino, to go to Auggie's side. They go to his side and "didn't even make a face when Ms. Rubin told them to come on my side, which a lot of kids do when they think I'm not looking," (43) Auggie says. When Auggie's hand accidentally touches one of Tristan's hands, "Tristan jerked his hand away so fast, he dropped his foil on the floor while also knocking everyone else's foil off the heating plate spoiling the whole experiment. What he was most concerned about was getting to the lab sink to wash his hands as fast as possible" (*Wonder* 43). At this time, Auggie knows for sure that "there was something about touching (him) at Beecher Prep" (43). He realizes that his facial deformity leads not only to staring but fear of touching as well. These are some of the obstacles he faces before reaching an epiphanic moment of recognition and acceptance. Auggie does not react violently to his peers' attitude towards him, which proves that he has a much deeper insight into his ability to help them an epiphanic moment of accepting him.

The prominent Professor of Philosophy, Erin Manning comments on the politics of touch. She writes, "to touch entails acknowledging the risks associated with the unknown toward whom I reach when I touch. Touch must always lead beyond where I anticipated it would.

Tact, on the other hand, keeps me in the realm of the almost-known, the anticipated-in-advance (135). She differentiates between "touch" and "tact." Touch involves movement, while "tact," refers to "a certain preemptive declaration that the body should not move" (135). Her analysis gives a brilliant explanation to the attitude of Auggie's peers at the beginning of the novel, an attitude that renders him untouchable. Manning suggests that "I touch that which I am not-yet touching. What I touch is not the object itself, but the potential of the object to be touched. I touch my capacity to emerge through the object. I touch my experience of reaching-toward" (142). Hence, fear of touching Auggie is a kind of social rejection. His peers refuse to treat him as a normal human being. These pervasive feelings do not change until the boys reach an epiphanic moment. Davis comments that, "Most people would be better off identifying with people with disabilities than fearing them...it isn't necessarily bad to be disabled, but it is bad to be discriminated against (*Bending Over Backwards* 5).

Manning elaborates on the meaning of touch. She says, "bodies empty themselves in order to be filled again. What fills them, among other things, is sense, sensation." (141). Refusing to touch Auggie is a refusal to know him, to accept him socially. She adds:

Could we suggest, then, that reaching out to touch an other is a moment of acknowledgment, a moment of recognition... In reaching out to you, I entice you to become a medium of expression. I ask you to participate. I invite you to experience. As my sensation translates itself to you, you immediately convey to me a response to this touch. (51)

Noticing how the other kids avoid touching him renders Auggie unable to interact normally with them. He cannot get involved in any activity except with those who treat him intimately such as Summer and Jack Will. Summer, one of the students who treats Auggie well, recounts how most of the boys consider touching Auggie as catching the "plague." She narrates, "It was actually because I was playing Four Square with August that I found out

about the Plague. Apparently, this is a 'game' that's been going on since the beginning of the year. Anyone who accidentally touches August has only thirty seconds to wash their hands or find hand sanitizer before they catch the Plague. I'm not sure what happens to you if you actually catch the Plague because nobody's touched August yet not directly (*Wonder* 88). Touching Auggie means destroying the barrier that is built between Auggie and his peers when they notice his face.

Goffman maintains that "the phrase *to stigmatize* originally referred to the branding or marking of certain people (e.g., criminals, prostitutes) in order to make them appear different and separate from others" (71). In a conversation with his sister at which he mentions his desire to leave school, she tells him that everyone hates school sometimes and even friends. Auggie answers her, "do people go out of their way to avoid touching you" (71). Although Auggie feels great pain because of his peers' attitude towards him, he decides to continue going to school. Obviously, one of the consequences of having a facial deformity is the feeling of being stigmatized. At many points of the novel, Auggie wishes to be a kid with a normal face. How he is perceived by his peers directly affects him and shapes his perception of himself. Therefore, Auggie suffers a lot at the beginning of the school year. The act of marking people in this way result in exile or avoidance (Goffman150). Undoubtedly, this statement is applicable to Auggie. According to Goffman, non-stigmatized people begin to "reinforce the inferior status with their behavior. Two of the most common ways in which nonstigmatized people convey a sense of fundamental inferiority to stigmatized people are social rejection or social isolation and lowered expectations" (154). Auggie's friend, Summer, describes the first reaction of the boys to Auggie, "No one was talking to him. Everyone was staring at him. All the girls at my table were whispering about him" (74). Davis maintains that "staring at people with visible disabilities creates barriers. Asking probing questions about how a person got their disability creates barriers. And while

you might be thinking you are not one of those who are involved in disabling disabled people, stop and consider" (*Beginning With Disability* 7).

Auggie's face has always been the target of a long stare that is followed by a sense of unjustifiable fear. Jack Will, Auggie's close friend at school, recounts his response to first encountering Auggie, even before meeting him at school. He admits that he first saw him when he was about five or six. Although he regrets his first reaction, he admits that "it's hard not to sneak a second look. It's hard to act normal when you see him" (88). Jack first saw Auggie in front of the Carvel on Amesfort avenue. Jack was sitting outside a store with his baby brother and the babysitter. August was sitting next to Jack. When Jack first noticed him, he "kind of went 'Uhh...It was the kind of 'uhh' you say when you're watching a scary movie" (87). Jack didn't mean to be rude that day. In fact, it is a reciprocal relationship; fear is not only felt by the 'starer' but also by the 'staree'. Auggie always possesses fear of meeting new kids.

Auggie's surprise when hearing the voices of other kids at school outside the room of Mr. Tushman can be interpreted as fear of meeting them, of noticing their stares and of having to react. Auggie describes, "all of a sudden I heard other voices outside the office: kids' voices. I'm not exaggerating when I say this, but my heart literally started beating like I'd just run the longest race in the world" (10). For Auggie, there is a remarkable difference between meeting a big kid and a small one. When he was little, he did not care about meeting new kids. He knew that they did not mean to hurt his feelings. Things are different with big kids; "they know what they're saying" (*Wonder* 11).

Palacio's *Wonder* reflects the reciprocal relationship between the 'starer' and the 'staree', but the dominating partner is the 'starer' not the 'staree'. A 'starer' seeks to delve deep into the person with a disability. Thomson argues in a stimulating extension of some of Erving Goffman's insights about stigma. She comments on the

aftermath of the social encounter between a person with disability and an able-bodied person and how disability is seen and interpreted. She explains:

in a first encounter with another person, a tremendous amount of information must be organized and interpreted simultaneously...When one person has a visible disability, however, it almost always dominates and skews the normate's process of sorting out perceptions and forming a reaction. The interaction is usually strained because the nondisabled person may feel fear, pity, fascination, repulsion, or merely surprise. (*Extraordinary Bodies* 12)

Hence, the able-bodied person gives himself the right to judge the person with a disability depending on how he/ she looks. Considering the above-mentioned quotation, Auggie's encounter with any person has always given rise to many negative feelings: fear, surprise, sadness, or inferiority. The feeling resulted from the encounter is not chosen by himself; it is a result of the starrer's reaction.

Jack recounts Auggie's first day at school, "that very first day of school I remember seeing August in the cafeteria. Everybody was looking at him. Talking about him...it was a total shocker for a lot of people to see him there on the first day of school. Most kids were even afraid to get near him" (110). Auggie describes being with other people who see him for the first time. He likens his face to the direction of the North in a compass; "all those eyes are compasses, and I'm like the North Pole to them" (130). Auggie's response is always pretending "not to notice" (22). This attitude leads ultimately to an epiphanic moment of recognition. Susan Wendell maintains that "being identified as disabled also carries a significant stigma in most societies and usually forces the person so identified to deal with stereotypes and unrealistic attitudes and expectations that are projected on to her/him as a member of this stigmatized group" (12). Furthermore, Auggie's deformity suggests for the other

kids deficiency in mental abilities; Julien doubts Auggie's mental abilities. When Auggie says that he is taking the science elective, Julien says to him, "if you've never, ever been in a school before, why do you think you're suddenly going to be smart enough to take the science elective?" (15). Under-estimation is also one of the multiple feelings resulting from the first encounter with a disabled person.

Hughes attaches the feeling of pity with the sight of a disabled person. He also connects it with an inner feeling of superiority and inequality. He states, "pity is a hierarchizing emotion in which superiority is at work in those who feel it and inferiority is the projected status of those who are its target" (71). He adds that pity is a "recurrent experience for disabled people" (71). Auggie accuses one of the students, Summer, of being nice to him only because she is asked by the headmaster to have a friendly attitude towards him. He says to her:

"You don't have to be friends with me. I know Mr. Tushman talked to you."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You don't have to pretend, is all I'm saying. I know Mr. Tushman talked to some kids before school started and told them they had to be friends with me."

"He did not talk to me, August."

"Yeah, he did."

"No, he did not."(92)

Auggie believes that pity is one of the responses to his condition. "The stigmatized variously generate alarm, disgust, contempt, embarrassment, concern, pity, or fear. These emotions in turn confirm the stigmatized person as one who is properly stigmatized" (Miller 199). Thus, a disabled person considers himself stigmatized because of the non-disabled reaction to him. Miller attaches disgust to the stare directed to a disabled person, he states that, "but disgust ranges more widely than we may wish, for it judges ugliness and



deformity to be moral offenses. It knows no distinction between the moral and the aesthetic, collapsing failures in both into an undifferentiated revulsion” (21). According to Miller, a facial deformity suggests for the non-disabled person a moral deficiency. It is not regarded as a difference.

Stereotyping Auggie and subjecting him to the feelings of pity, disgust, fear, and contempt drives him to hide behind his helmet. When he was little, he used to wear an astronaut helmet everywhere. Auggie recounts, “I wore it for a couple of years, but I had to stop wearing it when I had my eye surgery” (44). Using a helmet is a way of muting his difference. Auggie describes Halloween as the best holiday in the world. It is only during this day that he feels like a normal child. Although Auggie does not like taking pictures, he admits, “I have pictures of me in all my Halloween costumes” (44). Auggie loves Halloween most because he is not being stared at. Wearing a costume and a mask at Halloween guarantees not being stared at and not being touched. Halloween for Auggie is “the best holiday in the world,” as he describes. He likes to dress up in a costume and a mask that conceals his face, enabling him to move around like any other kid. Auggie explains his feelings in detail at Halloween:

For me, Halloween is the best holiday in the world. It even beats Christmas. I get to dress up in a costume. I get to wear a mask. I get to go around like every other kid with a mask and nobody thinks I look weird. Nobody takes a second look. Nobody notices me. Nobody knows me. I wish every day could be Halloween. We could all wear masks all the time. Then we could walk around and get to know each other before we got to see what we looked like under the masks. (58)

Yet, it is during Halloween that he meets one of the critical moments during his first year at school. It is a moment that leads to his transformation and the transformation of his friend Jack. Being hidden behind a mask enables him to overhear a conversation

between two of his peers at class; this is a situation that enables him to see himself through the lenses of those who stereotype him.

At school, Auggie is able to have two close friends: Summer, a girl who sees him as who he actually is and Jack. At the beginning Jack is Auggie's close friend; however, after Halloween, Auggie avoids talking to him. At Halloween, everyone is hidden behind his mask. Auggie comes to school wearing a costume that enables nobody to recognize him. Having overheard the conversation between Julien and Jack, Auggie understands the way people see him. Deep inside, he knows that he is not normal, but he gets hurt by being stared at. He narrates:

I was starting to think this was going to go down as one of the most awesome days in the history of my life, but then I got to homeroom...The first costume I saw as I walked inside the door was Darth Sidious...I knew right away it was Julian. He was talking to two mummies...I was going to go and sit at my usual desk, but for some reason, I don't know why, I found myself walking over to a desk near them, and I could hear them talking. (60)

Auggie is able to listen to what Jack and Julien say about him. He is shocked to know how they perceive him. He recounts their conversation, "what he really looks like is one of those shrunken heads... I think he looks like an orc..." "Oh yeah!" "If I looked like that," said the Julian voice, kind of laughing, "I swear to God, I'd put a hood over my face every day"(60). Auggie overhears the second mummy saying, "I've thought about this a lot and I really think . . . if I looked like him, seriously, I think that I'd kill myself (60). The three boys are talking about Auggie describing him as an 'orc.' They cannot imagine living a life with a facial deformity. They are unable to see that Auggie is a normal human being with a facial deformity that can happen to any person.

Auggie is able to recognize the voice of the mummy, it is Jack's. The boy he regards as a close friend to him. Then Jack continues, ..."I can't imagine looking in the mirror every day and seeing myself like that. It would be too awful. And getting stared at all the time" (46). Being dressed in his Halloween costume, Auggie is not identified by neither of them. Auggie describes his feelings after hearing these words:

The tears were so thick in my eyes I could barely see, but I couldn't wipe them through the mask as I walked. I was looking for a little tiny spot to disappear into. I wanted a hole I could fall inside of a little black hole that would eat me up... I ended up in the second-floor bathroom. No one was there...I locked the door to my stall and took off my mask and just cried for I don't know how long. (48)

Looking normal is now Auggie's wish. At this moment, he realizes that his face determines his fate; he believes he cannot be liked as who he is. He loses trust even in those who treat him well at school. Auggie asks, "why would people be mean? (59). Right after this situation he thinks about leaving school, however, he manages to overcome this situation and decides to continue struggling in a world that stigmatizes him. The relationship between a person with a disability and a non-disabled person is a reciprocal one. Auggie is stigmatized by his peers. At this incident, he sees himself the way they see him. Miller maintains that "the difficult question about the horror of visual ugliness and deformity is whether these ugly things or beings are horrific independently of the prospect of intimate contact with them" (81). All that Auggie wishes for at this moment is to live beyond the boundaries of having a stigma. To appear normal is now his ultimate wish. He equates normality to having a normal face. He feels that he can be accepted by his peers when having a normal face. At this moment, he understands normality according to the criteria of society. Later, his perception of normality evolves.

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Auggie accepts Jack's apology and they come to good terms at Christmas, after Jack gets suspended because of hitting Julian for badmouthing Auggie. It is at this time that Jack realizes that abnormality is not necessarily related to stigma. He realizes that he values Auggie's friendship and seeks to regain it. Jack undergoes a process of personal transformation after getting to know Auggie better. At the beginning Jack feels terrified when seeing Auggie, then when they become classmates, Jack is accustomed to his face: "The first couple of times I was like, whoa, I'm never going to get used to this. And then, after about a week, I was like, huh, it's not so bad" (91). As Jack gets to know Auggie, he feels enjoyment in his friendship. He describes Auggie: "he's pretty funny... a nice kid ...he's easy to hang out with and talk to and stuff...he's really smart. I thought he'd be behind everyone because he hadn't gone to school before. But in most things he's way ahead of me... now that I know him, I would say I actually do want to be friends with August" (91). At the beginning Jack is nice to him because Mr. Tushman asks him to treat him nicely, but later he states that "if all the guys in the fifth grade were lined up against a wall and I got to choose anyone I wanted to hang out with, I would choose August" (104). Auggie successfully manages to help Jack reach a moment of epiphany, to see Auggie beyond his facial deformity.

According to Lerita Brown, stigma allows some people to exercise power over others. "Assuming that flawless people do not exist, relative comparisons give rise to a feeling of superiority in some contexts... Physical abnormalities, for example, may be the most severely stigmatized differences because they are physically salient (148). The eye-to- eye contact initiates this relationship. Thomson provides a related explanation; she argues that a stare can "communicate social status, conferring subordination on a staree and ascendancy on a starrer" (*Staring* 40).

The fifth- grade trip is a focal point of variant significations for several characters in *Wonder*. Every year, in the spring, the fifth -

grade students of Beecher Prep spend three days and two nights in a place called the Nature Reserve in Pennsylvania. During this trip Auggie confronts one of the most unbearable incidents of staring. One of some elder boys from another school started screaming when noticing Auggie. He even turns a flashlight towards his face to draw the attention of the other boys and girls: “No way! No freakin way... all of them started half laughing and half covering their eyes now, pushing each other and cursing loudly, ‘what is that... I didn’t know we were watching Lord of the Rings tonight ... Look guys, it’s Gollum” (166). Foucault illustrates that “it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals.” The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, it is “the element of its articulation” (*Power/ Knowledge* 98). He means that it is through these mediums that power is articulated and achieves its goals. Foucault’s contribution lies in the shift from concentrating on the exercise of power on the body to the mind and soul. Auggie is called “ugly freak.” Thomson puts forward the argument that, “perhaps most destructive to the potential for continuing relations is the normate’s frequent assumption that a disability cancels out other qualities, reducing the complex person to a single attribute” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 12).

Curiosity, in this case, has been the motive behind staring. Thomson defines curiosity as “the itch to know; it shifts desire of the eye to desire of the mind.” While “staring is an ocular inquiry; curiosity is an intellectual inquiry. The eye leads, the mind follows...when a person in a position that grants them authority to stare take up that power, staring functions as a form of domination” (42). One of the meanings that a stare can convey is the feeling of disgust. Hence, this scene starts with a stare that is out of curiosity, leading to disgust and violence. It is a way of forcing an inferior position on those with disabilities. Hughes defines disgust as “a moral tribunal that is used to judge others, to assign them to an

inferior status and at the same time make a compelling case for 'our' superiority, 'our' place above the herd, 'our' purity" (72).

A fight breaks out. Jack and Auggie are followed by Amos, Henry and Miles, classmates who had not been kind to Auggie earlier. They decide now to defend and protect Auggie who helps them overcome their negative feelings towards him. In contrast to Hughes, Foucault considers some positive consequences of exercising power over somebody out of superiority. It incites a desire for resistance and sometimes fighting back which leads to a sense of pleasure. This is most applicable to this scene. Having managed to escape the boys, Auggie and his peers begin recounting and describing what has happened:

"You just rammed into him!" I said to Amos. "I know, right?" laughed Amos. "He didn't even see it coming!" said Miles. "He was like, 'Are you a freak, too?' and you were like, bam! " said Jack. "Bam!" said Amos, throwing a fake punch in the air. "But after I tackled him, I was like, run, Amos, you schmuck, he's ten times bigger than you! And I got up and started running as fast as I could!" We all started laughing. "I grabbed Auggie and I was like, 'Run!' " said Henry. "I didn't even know it was you pulling me!" I answered. "That was wild," said Amos, shaking his head. "Totally wild."

Apparently, the previous quotation is quite relevant to Foucault's argument. Power, according to him, is not about simply oppressing individuals or social classes. Rather, power is productive. Foucault develops this view of power as "productive" rather than "repressive" in Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*. He states that power cannot be studied in isolation from many other factors. There are multiple relations of power that cannot be reduced to identifying it only with the notion of oppression from one person or party to another. Foucault indicates that "pleasure is always an accompanying factor of power, the pleasure that comes of

exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. (*History of Sexuality* 45). Foucault means that on the one hand, some people find pleasure in exercising power. They enjoy having a closer watch of their targets while cloaked in a mask that hides their own real motivations. On the other hand, the target finds pleasure in resisting power. At this scene Auggie witnesses how his peers' attitude towards him has changed and this gives him a sense of pleasure.

Upon discovering that he has lost his hearing aid after the confrontation, Auggie begins to cry. His friends acquire a consoling attitude towards him. Putting his arm around Auggie's shoulder, Amos says to him "you're one brave little dude, you know?" Auggie describes, "when I kept on crying, he put both his arms around me like my dad would have done and let me cry" (169). For the first time, Auggie feels like he is a normal boy. On their way to the camp, Amos walks next to him, Jack is close on the other side, Miles is in front of him, and Henry is in the back. "They were surrounding me as we walked through the crowds of kids. Like I had my own emperor's guard," Auggie comments (170). Furthermore, Mr. Tushman gives Auggie a tight hug on their arrival.

While Auggie feels a total social rejection, he is able to transform some of the attitudes of the boys who had always been neglectful of him. Although Auggie gets hurt and loses his hearing aids, he truly feels that he is being supported by them. During this incident Jack, Amos, Miles, and Henry help Auggie to run away. After managing to escape from those boys, Auggie and his friends are very happy and excited. All of them for the first time high-five Auggie, the boy who has been avoided all the year long by most of the students at school; Auggie thanks them, "Yeah, dudes, thanks" I said, holding my palm up like Jack just had, though I wasn't sure if they'd high-five me too" (169). Touching now signifies support. This scene

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suggests that stigma stands in a peculiar relationship to the feeling of superiority. Miller comments on “letting disgust and contempt order our moral and social lives without their being subordinated to or constrained by countervailing sentiments and principles” (50). This leads to “punishing the stigmatized, who may have no justifiable cause for feeling guilt for their stigma” (50). This scene prompts an epiphanic moment for Jack, Amos, and Miles. Palacio's novel affirms the notion that “disability studies has had the dual effect of alerting us to the deeply ingrained fear of and unease about the disabled body in every sector of culture, while at the same time showing how that very body is a vital part of our collective human experience” (Castle 290).

Undoubtedly, the graduation ceremony is a significant scene. At it, Mr. Tushman gives his long speech about kindness. He has a very important message in his commencement address. He says, “shall we make a new rule of life... always to try to be a little kinder than necessary?” (186). Then he repeats it and adds, “because it's not enough to be kind. One should be kinder than needed” (186). He explains the meaning of kindness: “such a simple thing. A nice word of encouragement given when needed. An act of friendship, of passing smile” (186). He continues, “what I want you, my students, to take away from your middle-school experience is the sure knowledge that, in the future you make for yourselves, anything is possible. If every single person in this room made it a rule that wherever you are, whenever you can, you will try to act a little kinder than is necessary – the world really would be a better place” (186). The speech is very touching and quite telling. He encourages the students to be kind to any one regardless of any differences. Mr. Tushman ends, “Courage, Kindness, Friendship, Character. These are the qualities that define us as human beings, and propel us, on occasion, to greatness. And this is what the Henry Ward Beecher medal is about: recognizing greatness” (188). Mr. Tushman believes that August should receive the Henry Ward Beecher medal. He quotes Beecher's words: “Greatness lies not in being strong, but in



the right using of strength...He is the greatest whose strength carries up the most hearts by the attraction of his own” (188). Auggie is able to change the hearts of those around him. To draw their attention to what is good inside of him, is what really counts. The stigmatized character can achieve personal transformation along with the transformation of many other students. All the suffering and agony caused by staring and avoidance of touching him has ended once he is able to change people’s perspectives of a kid with a deformed face. It is during such a time that human potential for creativity can find a place, regardless of the stigma. Auggie is ultimately able to transform his peers; they can see his reality beyond his facial deformity. Accordingly, Auggie regains his identity after achieving recognition; it is at this point that it is acceptable to be who he is.

The touching of Auggie at the ceremony is now a mark not only of acceptance but admiration and respect as well. On hearing his name being called to receive the award, “people started applauding ...Maya who was next to me, give a little happy scream... and Miles patted my back... I felt lots of hands pushing me upward out of my seat, guiding me to the edge of the row, patting my back, high-fiving me” (189). Auggie describes how the other boys and girls are looking at him, “all I saw was a blur of happy bright faces looking at me, and hands clapping for me” (198). This scene can be set in contrast to the one at the science project expedition. At the graduation ceremony, he does not have to pretend not to notice people looking at him; instead, he enjoys being looked at. This happy moment ends with “the most amazing thing happened: everyone started standing up. Not just the front rows, but the whole audience suddenly got up on their feet, whooping, hollering, clapping like crazy. It was a standing ovation. For me” (189). Furthermore, everybody starts taking pictures of him. Auggie describes, “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” (190). He describes how all of them are “laughing and squeezing in

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tight against each other, and no one seemed to care if it was my face that was next to theirs or not" (190). The first description Auggie gives to himself at the beginning of the novel is worth quoting here. It illuminates how much, by the end of the school year, he manages to change the way other students perceive him. He says, "I guess. And I feel ordinary. Inside. But I know ordinary kids don't make other ordinary kids run away screaming in playgrounds. I know ordinary kids don't get stared at wherever they go... Here's what I think: the only reason I'm not ordinary is that no one else sees me that way (10). To return at various stages over the course of the novel, we can discover as illustrated earlier how Auggie's disability constitutes the epiphany. Auggie has chosen to be superior not inferior, to integrate into a hostile society that denies him his humble rights. Through integration he succeeds in bridging the gap between himself and others. "At one point or another, through genetic defect, accident or other trauma, and the processes of aging, we will all experience disability" (Castle 290).

There are some people who understand the meaning of kindness and its influence. Mr. Brown, Auggie's teacher, is one of them. He teaches the students precepts that can formulate their understanding of life. These precepts serve as a guide to how the kids should perceive Auggie. During the first day at school, Mr. Brown asks a very important question: "what are some really important things?" (27). He answers, "learning who you are is what you're here to do" (27). Mr. Browne's October precept is "your deeds are your monuments" (48). Auggie is also asked to write a paragraph about the meaning of the precept. One of the sentences which Auggie uses to explain the precept is "the things we do are more important than what we say or what we look like" (38). These ideas are ingrained in Auggie's mind and influence the way he reacts to any hostile behavior. Auggie's point of view of what people may think has changed over time. When discussing with his sister the costume she should wear at Halloween, she tells him that her chosen costume

might appear “too dorky.” He tells her, “who cares what other people think? right? (56).

Zygmunt Bauman relates the sensation of fear with finally facing it. He states: “Bizarre, yet quite common and familiar to all of us, is the relief we feel, and the sudden influx of energy, and courage, when after a long time of uneasiness, anxiety, dark premonitions, days full of apprehension and sleepless nights, we finally confront the real danger: a menace we can see and touch” (3). Auggie has been the source of fear for many of the students till the end of the school year. The camp scene and the graduation ceremony mark the boys’ ability to overcome their fear, fear of touch, fear of treating Auggie like any other normal child, fear that creates disgust and social distance. Instead of a stare a smile can initiate a normal relationship among people. Auggie is no longer a rejected child in the eyes of his peers. The first step that leads to ultimately treating Auggie’s deformity as invisible is the process of integration. Gibbons for example, suggests that as traditionally stigmatized groups become more integrated into the general population, stigmatizing attributes will lose some of their influence” (157).

Auggie experiences multiple emotions due to the responses of those who notice his face. At home, he is being treated with much care and love, whereas being at school subjects him to many violent responses. He has to cope with these responses which result from stares. In fact, a stare is a complicated response that exposes Auggie to many questions and inquiries, leaving him evading the looks by pretending not to notice. The opposite of a stare is a smile, a reaction that Auggie sees clearly at the graduation ceremony. It is at the graduation ceremony that he forgets about how he looks. Hence, Palacio suggests that society usually responds to a disabled either by staring or avoidance of looking.

Palacio suggests that the reaction of the non-disabled when encountering a person with a disability leads him to have a

## Reaching Epiphany in R. J. Palacio's *Wonder*: A Social Disability Study

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stigmatized image of himself. However, Auggie is able, by the end of the school year, to feel released from the chains of stigmatization. He is also able to change his peers' perception of a kid with a disability. Palacio demonstrates that many stigmatized kids can transcend their stigma after realizing that it is acceptable to be who they are.

A person with a disability is always stereotyped and unjustly judged. By accepting to integrate into society, Auggie can change the kids' perception of him. He gains strength to cope with living in a society that underestimates him. His presence at the beginning creates fear of even touching him. However, by the end of the novel, all his peers overcome the negative and hostile feelings they have for him. Auggie succeeds in helping his peers reach an epiphanic moment, one which enlightens them to the meaning of difference. In fact, the author addresses the problematic social attitudes towards disability and suggests that they must be changed.

*Wonder* opens as Auggie, a boy with a facial deformity, enters school and the story unfolds from several points of view. Experiencing being at school for the first time, he faces many difficulties. The novel begins from Auggie's point of view, but his journey has been also depicted from the perspectives of his classmates, his sister, his friend Jack, and others. These voices portray a community as it struggles with difference and with how to react to it. At the beginning of entering school, Auggie expects to face different attitudes from the students. Even when he goes on a tour at school, he has to accept the hostile and unacceptable attitude of one of his peers.

Through R.J. Palacio's arresting account of the life of Auggie, the writer suggests that the dilemma of difference can give rise to some positive consequences; it can be productive, rather than destructive. The book does not embody disability as a personal predicament; instead, it suggests that the presence of a child with a

disability can be a key to changing the attitudes of the able-bodied children. Auggie is able to change the prevalent attitudes of society towards disability. These attitudes are embodied in the way his peers respond to noticing his face. He proves that disability is not an individual limitation. Being at school can be considered his first step towards epiphany. Other moments include Mr. Brown's classes, the graduation ceremony, and the trip. In suppressing the passive feelings aroused after noticing Auggie, the students succeed in seeing the reality of Auggie. They are able to reject the stereotypical image of a person with a disability; an image that has been transformed by the end of the novel.

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