The Construction of the Main Child Character's Identities in *Matilda* (1996)

Chitra Yunia Mahmudah
English Language and Literature
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This study entitled *The Construction of the Main Child Character's Identities in Matilda (1996)* aims to reveal the construction of Matilda's identities and to derive meanings behind the construction. This study uses textual analysis and employs theories of identities from Burke and Stets (2009) as well as Boggs and Petrie's (2008) concept of characterizations, and film style from Bordwell and Thompson (2008). The findings show that Matilda has multiple identities which are constructed based on three bases of identities. Her multiple identities are established through her characterization and supported by cinematic aspects such as shot, color, lighting, and sounds. From the analysis, her character is seen as a non-mainstream construction. She is presented to be more mature than and not necessarily as innocent as other child characters in general.

Keywords: children's films, film style, identity

INTRODUCTION

The character of Matilda Wormwood in *Matilda* (1996) is different compared to other children characters in general. She is presented as an independent child with a brilliant mind. Moreover, she also has several positive traits such as a bibliophile and a supportive child. Thus, Matilda Wormwood is considered as a good role model for children.

As a part of children's literature, *Matilda* (1996) is considered as a good children's film. According to Brown (2017), there are several features that good children's films should have which are as following: First, children's films usually discuss and describe social connections between children with parents, friends, and communities; Second, children's films usually highlight children's experiences; Third, children's films introduce rule and order in the concepts of justice; Fourth, children's films should reduce inappropriate scenes such as sex, nudity, violence, criminality that often found in films in general; Fifth,

children's films should provide with upbeat and emotionally uplifting endings. In similar, *Matilda* (1996) introduces how the main child character Matilda Wormwood copes with the conflicts. One of the conflicts is the absence of parent-figure. Although the absence of parent-figure is considered as a serious problem, the film emphasizes more on positive outcomes such as being more independent and mature. However, since children still need guidance and protection from adults or parents, the substitute parent-figure is provided in the film to give hopeful message. For that reason, the film is chosen since it is fulfilled the five features of good children's films should have.

Moreover, the film is chosen since it highlights the issue of sense of self. Naidoo and Dahlen (2014) explain that a good children film usually helps children to develop their potentials and their sense of selves. The concept of selves is usually connected with identity. This concept of selves helps them to understand who they are. Identity, on the other hand, is defined as a fluid

entity since it can change according to a person's environment, context, and expectations from the society or a group (Burke & Stets, 2009). It can be inferred that environment, context, and expectations from a society or a group are contributing factors in developing and constructing identities besides interactions with other people.

There are some previous studies which examine on identity and *Matilda* (1996). Raburu (2015) conducted the study on children's identity and development. The data was taken from children's expressions. Based on children's expressions, Raburu (2015) found that children pose different identities and selves according to their interactions with other people and their environment. Different from Raburu (2015), Jerome, Hashim, and Ting (2016) have conducted study on character's multiple identities in the novel *Heroes* by Karim Raslam. They found that the character's multiple identities are constructed by words and phrases. Moreover, the character's ethnicity, religion, gender, and nationality are portrayed

through characterization, dialogue, and setting. Supheert and Franssen (2013), on the other hand, conducted study on the representation of female characters from Roald Dahl's works and one of them is *Matilda* (1996). The findings of their study defy the stereotype that female characters are presented silent and obedient. Different from Supheert and Franssen, Hidenoja (2015) analyzed ideology in *Matilda* (1996) regarding social class. Her findings show that Matilda is presented from upper middle class. It can be seen from her appearance and hobby.

Different from these studies, this study focuses on analyzing a child character's identities in a film. This study analyzes Matilda's identities with consideration from its narrative and cinematic aspects. This study attempts to investigate how the main child character's identities are constructed in *Matilda (1996)* and to derive meanings from the construction of her identities. The findings show that Matilda is presented as having multiple identities which are constructed based on the bases of identities in

reference to Burke and Stets' (2009) theory. As a result, Matilda's character is portrayed more mature and not necessarily innocent than other children characters. For that reason, her character is seen as a non-mainstream child character construction.

THEORETICAL REVIEW
Children's Identities

According to Erikson (1968, as cited in Sokol 2009) when a child start to identify himself or herself different from his or her parents, then it can be inferred that he or she begins to possess his or her own identity. At this stage, some children do not find that their parents' attitudes and behaviours interesting anymore. Thus, they will stop imitate them. This process is considered important since identity is formed in the childhood stage that will affect his or her future identity.

According to Burke and Stets (2009), identity is defined as a fluid entity since it can change accordingly to a person's environment, contexts, and expectations from a society or a

group. Thus, it can be inferred that identity is a dynamic construction that tends to change depend on the situations. If identity tends to change according to the situations, then it is possible for an individual to have multiple identities at the same time. Indeed, according to Burke and Stets (2009), a person can have several identities; social identities and person identities. Furthermore, they explain that people's identities have bases that make them who they are.

There are three bases of identities according to Burke and Stets (2009). The first base of identity is role identity. Burke and Stets (2009) describe role as a set of expectations that related with social position that help to guide people's attitude and behaviour. The second base of identity is group identity. Group identity is defined as an identity that an individual has according to where he belongs to in a certain group (Burke and Stets, 2009). There are two classifications of group identity which are the in-group and the out-group. Burke and Stets (2009) explain the in-group is those people who are similar to other

members of the group, while the out-group is those people who differ themselves from other members of the group. The third base of identity is person identity. According to Burke and Stets (2009), person identity helps people to define themselves as unique individuals rather than as a role-holder or a group member. It can be said that person identity makes a person different from another person.

Characterizations in Films

According to Boggs and Petrie (2008), a filmmaker usually focuses on one of the four major elements whether it is plot, emotional effect or mood, character, or style. Similarly, *Matilda* (1996) focuses on one major element which is character. Boggs and Petrie (2008) argue that a filmmaker who focuses on character usually tries to show how a certain character a certain character from his or her film is different from ordinary people. Similarly, Matilda's character is portrayed as a different child character from most of children characters in general. She is presented as a independent child with

a brilliant mind. Boggs and Petrie (2008) explain that their concept of characterizations in films are based on several aspects which are appearance, dialogue, actions, choice of name, dramatic foils, and reactions of other characters.

This study, however, only focuses on analyzing Matilda's characterization based on her actions, dialogues, dramatic foils, and reaction of other characters. Boggs and Petrie (2008) argue since appearance can be misleading, the other reflection of characters can be seen through their actions. Since films nowadays provide with great audio and sounds, dialogues are also considered important to reveal how characters are presented in a film. According to Boggs and Petrie (2008), characterization through dialogues can usually help to reveal characters' personalities, social status and academic background based on their choice of words, grammatical structures, and dialects. Characterization through dramatic foils, on the other hand, is used to contrast characters that have very different personalities, interests, and

opinions (Boggs & Petrie, 2008). Characterization through reactions of other characters, on the other hand, is usually the explanations of a character which is explained and described by other character (Boggs & Petrie, 2008). Therefore, characterization through reaction of other characters is chosen since other characters also contribute in presenting and describing other characters.

Film Style

In order to understand the whole meaning of a film, we should have knowledge of film forms that consists of narrative elements and cinematic aspects (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008). Thus, this study also employs theory of film style. According to Kuhn and Westwell (2012), film style is defined as the meaningful use of film technique in the film medium such as *mise-en-scene*, shots, angles, sounds, color, and editing. This study, however, only focuses on analyzing several film elements which are *mise-en-scene*, shots, angles, and sounds.

According to Bordwell and Thompson (2008), *mise-en-scene* is defined as putting into the scene. Lathrop and Sutton (2014) further explain that *mise-en-scene* focuses on the visual elements that exist in the scenes of a film. The elements of *mise-en-scene* are lighting, costume, and figure behavior. This study only focuses on analyzing two of *mise-en-scene* elements which are lighting and setting. As explained by Heintz and Stracey (2006), lighting is used to create certain atmosphere or mood in a frame. Setting, on the other hand, is used to show when and where the story is filmed, social status of the characters, and their personal information (Heintz & Stracey, 2006). These elements of *mise-en-scene* are chosen since those elements support the presentation of Matilda's identities in the film.

Shot is considered to be an important element in film style. Bordwell and Thompson (2008) define shot as the smallest unit that shows visual information regarding an action or an event. This study only focuses on analyzing medium shot, close-up shot, and long shot. Heintz

and Stracey (2006) illustrate that medium shot is usually taken from an actor's waits to his upper body, close-up shot is called as headshot since the subject is focused on an actor's head rather than the background, and long shot is used to emphasize the background however the presence of the actor is still recognizable.

According to Boggs and Petrie (2008), camera angles are important elements in film style since it can imply specific information. This study only focuses on analyzing three camera angles which are high angle, horizontal camera angle or eye-level angle, and low angle. To illustrate, high angle is usually used to show that the subject is smaller, weaker or less powerful thus the position of the camera is put higher on the subject so the subject look small and less significant (Heintz & Stracey, 2006). Horizontal camera angle or eye-level angle is usually taken in a straight line with subjects' eyes. Thompson and Bowen (2006) refer this angle as normal angle. Low angle, on the other hand, is the opposite of high angle. Thompson

and Bowen (2006) explain that low angle is used to make the characters or the subjects look bigger, more powerful, and more significant by putting the camera into lower position.

Since modern films have provided with good quality of sound, thus sound is considered as an important element in telling the story of a film through music, sound effects, and dialogues. As explained by Bordwell and Thompson (2006), film sounds can clarify what happens in the scene. Narration, for instance, is used to tell the story that cannot be shown effectively through visual (Boggs and Petrie, 2008). Moreover, dialogues and music are easily recognized in a modern film. The dialogues usually relay important information through characters' speeches. Meanwhile, music is usually used to show characters' feelings in the scene of a film.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses textual analysis as a method. According to Frey, Botan, and Kreps (1999), textual analysis aims to interpret a text by looking at

its content, structure, and functions. Since this study treats the film as a text, this study analyzes the construction of Matilda's identities with consideration of narrative and cinematic aspects. Therefore, this study employs theories of film style from Bordwell and Thompson (2008), and the concept of characterization as well from Boggs and Petrie (2008). The narrative analysis is focused on Matilda's characterization which are based on actions, dialogues, dramatic foils, and reactions of other characters. The cinematic analyis, on other hand, is focused on analyzing sounds, shot, and *mise-en-scene* elemets which are setting, lighting, and color.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the film, Matilda has multiple identities which are constructed based on bases of identities in reference to Burke and Stets's (2009) theory. The bases of her identities consist of three person and role identities, and one group identity.

Person and Role Identities

In the film, Matilda Wormwood is presented as three person identities in relation to her role identities. As explained by Burke and Stets (2009), it is possible for an individual to have multiple identities at the same time. Matilda's person identities are in line with Erikson's (1968, as cited in Sokol, 2009) explanation that her person identities can be seen after she identifies herself as a different individual from her parent without referring to her role identity or her group identity Her role identities, on the other hand, are based on her social position in a society. In terms of person and role identities, Matilda is presented as a self-reliant daughter, a smart student, and a supportive friend. Her person and role identities are portrayed from her characterization. In terms of cinematic analysis, setting and shot are supported how independent and smart Matilda's actions are.

Matilda's person and role identities as a self-reliant daughter, for example, can be seen from her external actions. Her external actions show that she can do anything by

herself without her parent's help and supervision.

Figure 4.1: Matilda cooks pancakes for her breakfast.

Figure 4.1 shows Matilda when she prepares a breakfast for herself. After her parent and her brother leave the house, she starts to cook her breakfast alone.

In relation to Matilda's external action, the cinematic aspects support her action as a self-reliant daughter. Figure 4.1 is taken with a long shot. The long shot provides us with the wide view of the setting. The scene is taken place in the Wormwood kitchen. There are no other characters seen in the scene except Matilda. It can be inferred that she cooks her breakfast without adults' supervision. Moreover, the shot is taken from low angle. Low angle shot makes her figure more powerful and bigger. In relation to the setting, the lighting in this scene is bright with yellow as the dominant color. Wright (1995) argues that

yellow is usually used to show optimism and confidence. In relation to her external action, the lighting and the color of the setting emphasize that although she does everything mostly by herself, she does not feel burdened or sad.

In conclusion, Matilda's person and role identities are portrayed from her characterization. The cinematic aspects are considered as a supporting element to explain her actions.

A Group Identity

In the film, Matilda is presented having a group identity which is a Wormwood. However, Matilda's character is presented having different behaviors and thought from other Womrwoods which are Harry, Zinnia, and Michael. Therefore, she is considered as an out-group of Womrwood family. Her group identity is established through her characterization which is based on dramatic foils and the in-groups' reactions.

Matilda's group identity as an out-group of Wormwood family, for example, can be seen from dramatic

foils. Foils are explained as the characters that are described having very different traits such as physical appearances, personalities, lifestyles, ideas, and attitude (Boggs & Petrie, 2008). The foil characters in the film are her father Harry, her mother Zinnia, and her brother Michael.

In the film, the foil characters are Harry, Zinnia, and Michael. They are presented as "couch potatoes". "Couch potatoes" are people who love spend most of their time watching television. Matilda, on the other hand, is presented as a bibliophile. It can be seen in figure 4.2.
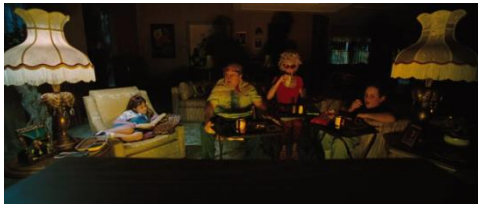

Figure 4.2: Harry, Zinnia, and Michael watch television while Matilda reads a book.

Figure 4.2 shows Matilda with her foils characters in one frame. In relation to cinematic aspects, the scene is taken with a long shot with eye-level angle. The long is used to make audience see that although they spend time together as a family, they do not share the same preference. Eye-level shot is used to infer that this is a common sight that often happens in their family. The lighting in this scene is used to distinguish their traits. Since a bibliophile is considered as a positive trait thus the lighting near to Matilda is brighter.

To sum up, Matilda's group identity as the out-group of Wormwood family is established through her characterization and it is supported by several cinematic aspects such as lighting and shot. Based on the analysis, Matilda is presented as having better preference and traits.

Matilda as a Non-Mainstream Child Character Construction

From the analysis, it can be said that Matilda's character is considered as a non-mainstream child character construction. Matilda is presented having multiple identities which are constructed by different bases of identities in reference to Burke and Stets' (2009) theory. Thus, it makes her character unique and different from most children characters in

general. Moreover, her identity also proves that identity has been developed and constructed even in the childhood.

Matilda's character is also presented more mature than her real age. This is related to one of conflicts in the film which is the absence of parent-figure in the film. In the film, her character can handle the issue very well. It can be seen from her actions which are considered as independent and her feeling when she is left alone at home.

Moreover, Matilda's character is considered as a non-mainstream child character construction is because she is not portrayed necessarily innocent. Innocence is defined as lack of knowledge and experiences of life (Braggs, Kehily & Montgomery, 2013). In the film, Matilda is presented having knowledge in laws that most of children usually do not have. This is in line with Wakeman's (2014) opinion, instead of highlighting children's innocent traits, the focus should be paid to what children are capable of doing things that most adults think that it is impossible for

them to do so. In similar, the film is focused more on her abilities.

CONCLUSION

Matilda's character is considered as non-mainstream construction. She is presented as having multiple identities which are constructed based on three person and role identities, and one group identity. In terms of person and role identities, Matilda is presented as a self-reliant daughter, a smart student, and a supportive friend. Meanwhile, in terms of group identity, she is presented as the out group of Womrwood family. Narratively, her identities are portrayed through her characterization. In terms of cinematic aspects, the narrative analysis is supported by cinematic analysis.

In general, *Matilda* (1996) is an interesting film to be watched. The film shows a different child character unlike the expected ones. Children characters especially girls are usually portrayed silent and obedient. However, Matilda's character is presented differently. Her character is presented smart and

brave to speak out her mind. The film also gives space for children to develop their identities and perspectives because the main character is not portrayed as monotone one.

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