

Contemporary Debates in Human Rights and Literature

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The Idea of Humanity

Edited by

Elvan Karaman Mez
and Ferma Lekesizalin

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INTRODUCTION

As an interdisciplinary field of study, human rights and literature has gained unprecedented popularity concurrently with the growing attention of academics and activists towards the impact of literary texts on the social and cultural perceptions of human rights. From the masterpieces of Greek tragedy, in which heroes and heroines stand against the tyrannical structures, to recent posthumanist narratives, literary imagination has had an undeniable role in shaping our understanding of human rights and claims to those rights. As opposed to legal and political discourses, literary explorations of human rights provide an empathic engagement with the lived realities of individuals and communities. Literature, on the one hand, displays a unique ability to represent struggles, triumphs, and injustices that define our collective existence and on the other hand, deals with the complexities and ambivalences of the human subject as an abstract universal construct. The human rights and literature scholarship galvanizes its critical enterprises even more energetically by focusing its inquisitive gaze on such critical ability of literary texts. The scholarly work in this field is filled with the rigorous investigations of the relationship between literary texts and the social, political, and philosophical formulations of human rights, which open this relationship to new interpretations.

The human rights and literature scholars have performed two crucial tasks one of which is to examine how perceptions and concerns about human rights impact the way we read literary texts and the other is to create critical frameworks for interpreting literary explorations of the discourse of human rights. Their performance has helped literary criticism develop new interpretive approaches which enhance the interdisciplinary studies in humanities. The scholarly development of human rights and literature, on the other hand, owes a great deal to the discussions and questions formulated by a number of fields such as critical race and class theory, feminist studies, queer theory, intersectionality, trauma studies and postcolonial criticism. Inspired by these inquiries, the scholarship in human rights and literature continues to contribute fresh perspectives to humanities and influence the future orientations in the interdisciplinary fields.

The investigations into literary engagements with human rights as a discourse of universality is a recent enterprise undertaken by the scholars of human rights and literature. As the defining principle codified in the

international law and the foundational idea of human rights system, the universality of human rights is taken for granted as a self-evident concept. The core principle of universality is, however, challenged by cultural relativism, the proponents of which claim that the values underlying human rights depend on the specificities of cultures, regions, and societies as well as political contexts. *The Idea of Humanity: Contemporary Debates in Human Rights and Literature* attends to these dissonances. Observing the core ideas and principles of the discourse of universality, the authors in this volume also provide full confrontations with the particular disputes and controversies underlying human rights. Mindful of the dynamic relationship between universality and diversity as well as cultural rights, cultural mixing and openness, they avoid reading human rights as a uniform and monolithic discourse and take the contexts of otherness underlying literary texts into full consideration. Pointing to the capacity of literature to bring the other, the marginalized, the oppressed, and the forgotten to the center and conducting inquiries in a wide variety of contexts from people with disabilities to the rights of children, women, indigenous peoples, refugees, and LGBTQ, the authors in this volume define the challenges literary texts pose to the exclusionary discourses of power and privilege.

The critical investigations into the literary representations of human rights issues and questions in *The Idea of Humanity: Contemporary Debates in Human Rights and Literature* are further motivated by the ambivalences and inconsistencies in the dominant discourses of subjectivity and otherness. The essays in this collection approach the monolithic, unified, and essentializing constructs of the subject of human rights with tact. What further persists in their divergent inquiries into literary texts is the commitment to show their capacity to resist the unquestioned beliefs, biases, entrenched presumptions, and commonplaces. As the authors examine the literary confrontations with oppression, discrimination, and injustice in the following chapters, they, therefore, uncover the subversive potential of literature which accounts for its enduring power. It is through its inexhaustible capacity to invent strategies for confronting the dominant paradigms of power and privilege, literature captures the complexities of human condition.

The Idea of Humanity: Contemporary Debates in Human Rights and Literature has not set out with the aim of constructing a specific canon of 'human rights literature.' The essays in this collection deal with a variety of literary genres and contexts, offering multifaceted readings of the intersections of literature and human rights. As the authors turn to the multifarious contexts of human rights questions from children's literature to Native American poetry and the implications that technology bears for the

future of humanity, their primary intention is to bring the new horizons opened up by literature in terms of enhancing our grasp of human rights. While the portrayals of disability in contemporary children's literature, for example, challenge the traditional notions of normalcy and inclusion, the psychological dislocation of individuals caught between worlds in modern narratives reflects broader crises of identity and belonging. This collection further considers how literature serves as a space for imagining alternative futures—futures in which individuals and institutions engage with advances in technologies that transform and extend the mind and body, which, in turn, is very likely to transform the subject of human rights. In equally illuminating and engaging ways, each of the following essays invites us to contemplate the potentialities, variations, and shifts implicated in the present and the future formulations of human rights.

The variegating constructions of the 'other' from empathic to discriminatory comprise the underlying themes of the essays written by Artemis Papailia, Erel Mez, Srebrenka Mačković and Lejla Mulalić. While Papailia undertakes an examination of disability as 'otherness', Mez, Mačković, and Mulalić consider the mechanisms of 'othering' refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants through law and the applications of law.

In "Visual Representations of Children with Disabilities in Contemporary Picturebooks for Children," Artemis Papailia examines disability in five different picture books for children which confront the socially and culturally constructed notions of disability. The disabilities of the protagonists, ranging from cognitive to psychiatric and physical, are analyzed in detail to reveal the experiences of vulnerability and 'othering.' Papailia shows that the stories pose a challenge to the exclusionary constructions of normality embedded in 'ableism' through nuanced portrayals of empathy as an essential component of human bonding.

In "Forced to a State Geographically and Psychologically In-Between: Lack of Sense of Belonging in Ali Smith's 'The Go-Between,'" Erel Mez explores vulnerability and otherness from the refugee's point of view. Exposed to discrimination and mistreatment during his struggle to seek asylum in Spain, the protagonist feels forsaken and lost. Mez's reading of Ali Smith's short story is thus based on the denial of human rights to refugees, asylum-seekers, and migrants who are forced to leave their homelands due to their deprivation of those rights. Concerns about assimilation and the status of the migrant 'other' similarly animate Srebrenka Mačković's discussion of in-betweenness in "Hybridity and Mimicry in Hanif Kureishi's 'My Son The Fanatic.'" The clash between modernism and fundamentalism--between western capitalism and islamic life style--is transposed to a struggle between the father, Parvez, a middle-

aged taxi driver in London, and his son Ali, a fundamentalist, who disdains his father for having been completely assimilated into the western culture. While Ali rejects assimilation and aggressively asserts his 'Muslim' identity, he, nevertheless, becomes more and more embroiled in sectarianism and bigotry.

Lejla Mulalić's article, "Gaining a Voice in Suffering: The Case of James Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late*," offers still more fresh insights about linguistically constructed ways of othering and discrimination. Mulalić inquires into the socio-cultural and political resonances of Sammy's voice, a working-class man who wrestles with the problems that emerge after he loses his ability to work. Examining Kelman's use of language as a subversive tool, she shows how the protagonist's Glaswegian dialect, which pushes him to the margins of the society, serves as a symbol of resistance as well as a means of asserting his identity in a society that constructs him as the 'other.'

In ways that correspond to the postcolonial scholarship on the imperial expansion of the West and transatlantic slavery, human rights bear implications for a rethinking of the imperial and colonial pasts. A. Hilal Şengenç's "Fred D'Aguar's *The Longest Memory*: To Remember Or Not To Remember Slavery" examines such implications in Fred D'Aguar's *The Longest Memory*, a novella which reconstructs the suppressed history of the slave trade in the Caribbean region, addressing the damaged identity of the colonized and the enslaved. Şengenç argues that the acts of remembering and reconstructing are recuperative practices that help the characters cope with the traumas of the past. Her reading of D'Aguar's work thus contests the characterizations of postcolonial literature as a literature of resentment and despair.

Two of the essays in the collection undertake a consideration of human rights in the context of Indigenous peoples of America. Dilek Ünügür Çalışkan looks at the suppressed history and cultural assimilation of Indigenous people as a violation of human rights in "Thingification and 'The Fall of the Goddess' in Nila NorthSun's poem 'Reservation Girls.'" Çalışkan's analysis of NorthSun's poem "Reservation Girls" elucidates the poet's confrontations with the 'whitewashed' notions of history based on 'Indigenous-free' constructions of American identity and culture. The elements which represent the dehumanizing aspects of reservation life in NorthSun's poem further reveal hypocrisy and deception embedded in the white conceptions of rights. Çalışkan incorporates the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Luce Irigaray in her assessment of NorthSun's poetics of resistance to underline the poet's resentment of the systematic erasure of Indian cultures and languages. In "The Inexorable (Ex)Termination of

Native Americans and their Culture in Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman* and *Tracks*," Gillian M. E. Alban similarly considers the Native reservation with relation to the eradication of Indigenous identity, cultures, languages, knowledge, and history. In Erdrich's novels, settler colonialism and the elimination of the native emerge as issues imbued with controversies with regard to the implementation of human rights. Alban's essay deals with these controversies analyzing Erdrich's narrative reconstructions of the unresolved and unsettled tensions between Indigenous peoples and the United States of America.

"In Others' Words" by Vesna Suljić tackles with human rights within the context of Aboriginal Australians. Suljić puts the works of Aboriginal female writers--Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), Sally Morgan, and Auntie Rhonda Collard-Spratt--who bring a powerful voice to the white literary canon under scrutiny. She addresses the prominent discourse of the Civil Rights and political struggle in Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poems as the verbal components of the poet's involvement in direct political action and shows how the poet's integrationist poetics reaches out for a world that transcends the boundaries of race, ethnicity, and nationality. The author further tackles with the reconstructions of 'authentic' identity in the works of Sally Morgan and Auntie Rhonda Collard-Spratt and considers the issue of authenticity with relation to Aboriginal life-narrative which disrupts the norms of 'white' writing.

The Idea of Humanity: Contemporary Debates in Human Rights and Literature offers a critical contribution to the ongoing dialogue between literature and human rights. The collection underlines the enduring relevance of literature in the contemporary struggles for human rights and invites readers to consider how literature can provoke critical thought, inspire empathy, and ultimately, drive meaningful change in society. Addressing the profound ethical questions that lie at the heart of the human rights discourse, the contributors show how literary texts question biases and prejudices, uphold human dignity, promote inclusivity and respect, while continuing to be our greatest inspirations in the pursuit of a just and equitable world.

CHAPTER ONE

VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN CONTEMPORARY PICTUREBOOKS FOR CHILDREN

ARTEMIS PAPAILIA

Introduction

Disability, which encompasses a variety of conditions and experiences, is generally defined as the rise of a medical condition that puts limitations on essential life functions. The World Health Organization (WHO) describes disabilities as impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions, emphasizing the interaction between health conditions and contextual factors, both personal and environmental (WHO, 2011).

Historically, the perception and treatment of disability have been influenced significantly by cultural, social, and medical attitudes. Traditionally, disability is viewed through a medical lens, focusing on the individual's physical or mental impairments. This approach, referred to as the medical model of disability, prioritizes diagnosis, treatment, and, where possible, curing or fixing the condition. However, this model has been criticized for its limited perspective, which overlooks the societal contributions to disability (Shakespeare, 2010).

In contrast, the social model, popularized by disability rights activists, argues that while individuals may have impairments, it is society that disables them through creating barriers and perpetuating discriminatory attitudes (Oliver, 1990). This model has been instrumental in shifting the focus from the individual's condition to the societal structures that need to be adapted to accommodate all individuals regardless of their physical or mental conditions.

Disabilities can be broadly categorized into several types, including physical disabilities (e.g., mobility issues, spinal cord injuries), sensory disabilities (e.g., blindness, deafness), cognitive disabilities (e.g., learning

disabilities, Down syndrome), psychiatric disabilities (e.g., depression, bipolar disorder), and neurodiversity (e.g., autism spectrum disorders, ADHD). Each category encompasses a range of experiences and challenges specific to the individuals it affects.

The 20th and early 21st centuries saw a burst of activity in the disability rights. Legislative measures like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the United States have been crucial in advancing the rights and accessibility for individuals with disabilities (ADA, 1990). Globally, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) represents a significant commitment to the rights and well-being of disabled people (United Nations, 2006).

Despite these advances, individuals with disabilities often confront significant challenges such as physical barriers, limited access to education and employment, and social exclusion. Disability rights organizations strive to tackle these issues, championing equal opportunities and autonomy, enabling those with disabilities to live independently and engage fully in society. Literature plays a crucial role here, offering profound insights into the lived experiences of those with disabilities, thereby fostering a deeper understanding and empathy in readers.

Inclusion is fundamental in addressing the needs of individuals with disabilities. This process entails creating environments and opportunities that are accessible and accommodating to everyone, regardless of their abilities. Such inclusive practices benefit not only individuals with disabilities but also the broader society, nurturing diverse, vibrant communities and enriching our collective social fabric. Literature often reflects these themes, illustrating how inclusive societies uphold human rights and contribute to the collective good.

Disability is a complex and nuanced concept that covers a spectrum of experiences and challenges. Addressing these challenges necessitates a multifaceted approach that encompasses medical, social, and personal perspectives. Through heightened awareness, acceptance, and inclusive practices, society can progress towards a more equitable and empathetic understanding of disability. This evolution recognizes the value and contributions of every individual, echoing the principles of human rights that literature frequently explores and champions.

Disability in Children's Literature

The way disability is represented in mythology can provide insights for understanding the contemporary representations of disability. Myths, often passed down through generations, mirror the beliefs, fears, and hopes of the

cultures they originate from. From mythological stories to contemporary children's books, the portrayal of disability in these narratives has evolved significantly, reflecting broader societal shifts towards inclusivity and empathy. In the realm of mythology, characters with disabilities often held prominent positions, but their portrayals were double-edged. Take, for instance, Hephaestus, the Greek god of blacksmiths. Born with a physical disability, he was depicted as exceptionally skilled in metalworking. His character often exemplified the trope of disability being compensated by extraordinary talent or insight, suggesting that his physical impairment was counterbalanced by his remarkable craftsmanship. Similarly, Echo in Greek mythology, who lost her voice due to a curse and could only repeat what others said, illustrated how disabilities were often seen as punishments or curses, reflecting a societal tendency to view disability negatively.

Moving into the realm of traditional folk tales, these narratives frequently used disability as a vehicle to impart moral lessons. Stories like the famous Indian fable "The Blind Men and the Elephant" (1974) taught valuable lessons about perspective and understanding. However, such tales inadvertently perpetuated stereotypes about blindness, implying a lack of knowledge or understanding among the blind. In European folklore, characters like Hans from the Brothers Grimm's "Hans My Hedgehog" (1815) faced rejection and fear due to their differences. Hans, born as a human-hedgehog hybrid, eventually finds respect and a happy ending, reflecting the trope of 'overcoming' disability, which was common in many folk narratives.

In the early examples of Children's Literature, disability was either invisible or portrayed by way of stereotypes. Characters with disabilities were rare and often depicted as pitiable, helpless, or in need of cure. These narratives reinforced societal prejudices and failed to provide young readers, especially those with disabilities, with relatable or empowering representations. For instance, Charles Dickens' "Tiny Tim" from "A Christmas Carol" (1843) embodies the trope of the 'innocent, suffering child' whose disability is used to evoke sympathy rather than to develop a rounded character.

The 20th century marked a gradual transition with authors starting to introduce more nuanced portrayals of disability. Characters began to appear as integral parts of the story, with their disabilities being one aspect of their multifaceted identities. For example, in "Heidi" by Johanna Spyri (1880), Clara's journey from being wheelchair-bound to walking serves as a subplot that interweaves themes of friendship, determination, and healing.

Indeed, modern adaptations focus on empowering characters with disabilities, portraying them as capable and complex individuals. For

example, “The Girl Who Thought in Pictures: The Story of Dr. Temple Grandin” (2017) adapts the true story of Dr. Grandin, an autistic individual, emphasizing her unique way of thinking and her contributions to animal science. This story offers a positive and empowering representation of neurodiversity. Similarly, “A Splash of Red: The Life and Art of Horace Pippin” (Bryant, 2013) a picture book biography of the African American painter who overcame a disability caused by a WWI injury, showcases how disability can intersect with other aspects of identity, like race and history, offering a more nuanced representation.

The role of contemporary authors and storytellers is crucial in shaping these narratives. There is an increasing recognition of the need for authentic voices, particularly from authors with lived experiences of disability, to contribute to these stories. Their perspectives can ensure that the representations are accurate, respectful, and devoid of stereotypes. For instance, “El Deafo” (2014) by Cece Bell, a graphic novel memoir for children, recounts the author’s experiences growing up with a hearing impairment. This story is significant for its authentic portrayal of disability, told from the perspective of someone who has lived it. “Out of My Mind” (2010) by Sharon M. Draper, featuring a young girl with cerebral palsy who, despite her inability to speak, has a vibrant mind and spirit, is another example of a contemporary story that challenges traditional perceptions of disability, focusing on the character’s inner world and abilities.

The portrayal of disabilities in these tales significantly impacts cultural perceptions and attitudes. Positive and realistic representations can help break down prejudices and foster a more inclusive society. These stories have the power to influence how future generations view disability, making it essential to approach these narratives with sensitivity and awareness. For children, especially, these narratives serve as educational tools, shaping their understanding of diversity and disability.

According to Andreas Karakitsios (2008, 195) the relationship between Children’s Literature and Special Education can be viewed as a dynamic intersection with two levels of interaction and two research areas: a) Children’s Literature within Special Education, and b) Special Education within Children’s Literature. The primary subject here is Special Education along with its ideology, philosophy, and characteristics, that is reflected and represented within the literary text.

In conclusion, the journey of disability representation in Children’s Literature is a testament to the evolving societal attitudes towards disability. From mythological depictions to modern, empowering narratives, these stories not only reflect cultural perceptions but also have the power to reshape them, advocating for a more inclusive and understanding society.

As we continue to write and retell these tales, it is crucial to ensure that they reflect the diverse realities of all individuals, paving the way for a future where every person's story is heard and valued.

The Role of Illustrations

The role of illustrations in picturebooks, particularly in the context of depicting disability, is profoundly impactful. These visual elements do much more than simply accompany the text; they offer a narrative, one that can significantly influence a child's understanding and perception of disability.

Illustrations have the unique ability to demystify disability for young readers. Through thoughtful and accurate depictions of characters with disabilities engaged in everyday activities, illustrations can convey the message that these individuals are more alike than different from others (Blaska, 2003; Prater and Dyches, 2008). For instance, a picture of a child using a wheelchair or a prosthetic limb in a playground setting alongside peers can help normalize the presence of disability in everyday life. These images work to dispel the mystery or fear that children might associate with unfamiliar disabilities.

In picturebooks, the synergy between text and illustration is crucial (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001; Yannicopoulou, 2008). While the text might narrate a story, the illustrations provide the visual context and can add many layers of further understanding. For stories involving characters with disabilities, illustrations can visually explain aspects that the text might not cover in detail.

In the realm of Children's Literature, illustrations play a pivotal role in shaping young readers' perceptions and attitudes, particularly regarding disability. These visual narratives are much more than mere accompaniments to the text; they are powerful tools for communication, education, and social change. Illustrations in picturebooks serve a profound educational purpose. They extend beyond basic literacy to teach children about the diversity of human experiences, including the various aspects of living with a disability. For example, a book depicting a day in the life of a child with a physical disability can enlighten young readers about the adaptability and resilience required. It can also introduce them to assistive devices and tools, fostering a broader understanding and acceptance.

The emotional connection fostered by illustrations is another critical aspect. Children often relate to stories through their visual elements. Illustrations that portray characters with disabilities expressing a range of emotions -from joy to sadness, frustration to triumph- help young readers

recognize that these characters experience a full spectrum of emotions, just like themselves (Landrum, 2001). This emotional depth fosters empathy and helps dispel the notion of ‘otherness’ that is often wrongly associated with disability.

Subtle messaging through art is a unique capability of illustrators. The way characters with disabilities are positioned -whether in the foreground or background, leading activities or participating- sends implicit messages about inclusion and the roles of individuals with disabilities in society. Thoughtful depiction can reinforce messages of equality and active participation. Also, Angela Yannicopoulou (2005, 95) notes that:

The book articulates ideological positions and defines ideological parameters not only through what it chooses to say but also through its silences, encompassing both what is written and what is omitted. It includes everything mentioned in the text and the images, as well as those aspects that remain outside the narrative. This approach underscores the importance of both the explicit and implicit messages conveyed in literary works.

This concept underscores the multifaceted nature of storytelling, where meaning is constructed through a combination of what is explicitly presented and what is subtly implied or deliberately left out. This approach encourages readers to think critically about both the overt and covert messages in literature.

The representation (or lack thereof) of diverse characters and lifestyles in children’s books is a key aspect of its ideological stance (for more about ideology in Children’s Literature see: Hollindale, 1992; Ekonomidou, 2000; Kanatsouli, 2000; Stephens, 1992). Books that feature a wide range of characters and experiences can broaden children’s understanding and acceptance of diversity. Picturebooks that include characters with a wide range of disabilities, both visible and invisible, contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of what disability can entail (Smith-D’Arezzo, 2003). This approach helps children understand that disability is not a singular experience but a spectrum with many different facets.

Cultural sensitivity in illustrations is also paramount. Depicting disabled characters from diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds ensures that all children can see themselves reflected in these stories. This inclusive approach enriches the narrative and more accurately reflects the real-world diversity within the disability community. The interaction of characters with their environment in illustrations is equally important. Showing adaptive methods or tools that aid their interaction, like ramps, Braille signs, or sensory-friendly spaces, educates about accessibility and normalizes these adaptations in the minds of young readers.

Ultimately, the impact of illustrations on young readers' perceptions of disability is profound. These visual stories have the power to challenge prejudices, encourage acceptance, and foster a more inclusive mindset from a young age. They are crucial not just for entertainment but also for educating and socializing children towards a more inclusive understanding of the world around them.

In conclusion, illustrations in children's picturebooks are a vital component in the portrayal of disability. They educate, connect emotionally, convey subtle yet powerful messages, and broaden the understanding of young readers. Through thoughtful and inclusive representation, these visual narratives significantly contribute to shaping a society that values and respects diversity in all its forms, promoting empathy and inclusion from the earliest stages of childhood.

Methodology

In our exploration of the visual portrayal of children with disabilities in Greek picturebooks, we utilize the Iconotext Theory by Nikolajeva and Scott (2001) as our guiding framework. This theory, which examines the interplay between text and image in literature, is particularly apt for analyzing how picturebooks communicate narratives about disability.

Our study centers on a selection of picturebooks from the Greek market, comprising both translations and original works. The books chosen for this analysis include: "I only want to play with you" ("Θέλω μόνο να παίζω μαζί σου") written by Merkourios Autzis and illustrated by Nikolaos Andrikopoulos (2004) -cognitive disabilities, "He" ("Ο Αυτός") written by Petros Poulakis and illustrated by Vassilis Papatsarouchas (2014)-neurodiversity, "Friends?... Light Lantern" ("Φίλοι; Φως φανάρι"), written by Francesca Alexopoulou-Petraki and illustrated by Maria Tzampoura (2005) -sensory disabilities, "Mr. Huff" ("Ο κύριος Ουφ") by Anna Walker (2020¹) - psychiatric disabilities and "Susan Laughs" ("Η Αργυρώ γελάει") written by Jeanne Willis and illustrated by Tony Ross (2017) -physical disabilities. These titles have been specifically chosen for their relevance to Greek readers and their portrayal of disability in their distinct categories.

We mainly look at how children with disabilities are portrayed in the narrative and illustrations of picturebooks. This question combines the examination of both text and imagery, focusing on how disability is depicted. It allows for an integrated analysis of the narrative and visual elements, in line with the Iconotext Theory (The elements of the character

¹ The publication dates associated with the titles "Susan Laughs" and "Mr. Huff" correspond to the years in which these books were translated into Greek.

with disabilities -gender, age, syndrome, pathology and his/her particular characteristics- and how are they represented through the use of narrative and pictorial devices). Secondly, we try to understand how these picturebooks reflect the attitudes and perceptions towards disability. This question aims to explore the social and cultural context, looking at how societal attitudes towards disability might influence or be reflected in these books. Next, we explore the impact these representations might have on young readers. Understanding the potential impact of these portrayals on children's perceptions and attitudes towards disability is essential. This question considers the implications of how disability is depicted and how these depictions shape young readers' understanding and empathy.

In examining these books, our analysis involves a review of both the narratives and illustrations, observing how they interact to portray disability. We focus on the representation of disability, scrutinizing aspects such as realism versus stereotypes and the diversity within these portrayals. This entails examining how the text describes the disability and how the illustrations visually represent it, noting whether the depiction is empowering or if it falls into traditional stereotypes.

This methodology is not just about analyzing the books in isolation but about synthesizing the findings to provide a broader picture of how disability is portrayed in Children's Literature within the Greek context. We aim to identify trends, note advancements and areas needing improvement, and discuss the implications of these portrayals for authors, illustrators, and publishers in the field of Children's Literature.

Cognitive disabilities in “I only want to play with you” (“Θέλω μόνο να παίζω μαζί σου”) written by Merkourios Autzis and illustrated by Nikolaos Andrikopoulos (2004)

“I only want to play with you” is a Greek picturebook written by Merkourios Autzis and illustrated by Nikolaos Andrikopoulos in 2004. It tells the story of Manos, a young boy with Down Syndrome, and offers an exploration of disability, acceptance and childhood interactions. The book's narrative and illustrative elements combine to present a sensitive and multifaceted portrayal of a child living with Down Syndrome, reflecting broader cultural attitudes and potentially influencing young readers' perceptions and empathy towards individuals with disabilities.

At its core, the story of Manos is one of difference and acceptance. Manos, with characteristic features of Down Syndrome like almond-shaped eyes and a flattened facial profile, faces initial rejection from his peers. The children in his neighborhood, influenced by societal preconceptions and

lack of understanding, are reluctant to include him in their play. This portrayal is a direct reflection of the challenges faced by many individuals with disabilities, particularly children, who often encounter social exclusion and misunderstanding due to their differences.

The narrative is delivered through a third-person omniscient perspective, allowing the reader to observe the unfolding events objectively. This narrative style provides a comprehensive view of the situation, but it also creates a certain distance between the reader and Manos, which might affect the reader's ability to fully empathize with him. The story progresses with Manos following his peers to a river and unintentionally scaring them, further complicating their relationship. However, as Manos reveals a secret, a beautiful spot in the forest filled with butterflies, the children begin to see him in a different light, recognizing his unique qualities and capacity for kindness and love.

The book confronts and challenges negative stereotypes and prejudices associated with Down Syndrome. Instances where Manos is called “μογγολάκι” (a derogatory term for people with Down Syndrome) or is told by another child: “Go home... you're not like us, you can't speak” (Autzis & Andrikopoulos, 2004, 11), highlight the harsh reality of societal attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. These moments are pivotal in the story as they accurately depict the discrimination faced by many children with disabilities, but they also serve as a starting point for change and understanding.

The illustrations by Andrikopoulos play a significant role in the storytelling. The realistic depiction of Manos, with attention to the physical characteristics of Down Syndrome, contributes to the normalization and visibility of disability. Manos is depicted with realism, with a round face with a flat profile and small facial features (nose, mouth, ears, and eyes), a protruding tongue, an almond-shaped, upward slanting eyes with epicanthal folds, with white spots on the iris of the eyes, short neck and small head (brachycephaly) and small feet. Furthermore, the use of vivid colors and expressive imagery enhances the emotional impact of the story, particularly in scenes depicting Manos's interactions with his peers and the natural world.

A critical moment in the book occurs when Manos shows the children a beautiful and hidden part of the forest, a place that becomes a metaphor for his own overlooked beauty and worth. This scene is significant as it represents a turning point in the children's perception of Manos. The author uses this moment to counterbalance the disability of Manos with a special ability—his connection with nature and his gentle spirit. It is a narrative choice that both highlights Manos's unique strengths and subtly challenges the reader to reconsider their own perceptions of individuals with disabilities.

The book also addresses communication barriers associated with Down Syndrome. Mano's speech difficulty is portrayed realistically, reflecting the challenges faced by many individuals with this condition. His words: "Not our gardens! Here is their home! They ruin their nests and can't fly. Their mother cries..." (Autzis & Andrikopoulos, 2004, 20), though difficult to articulate, convey a profound understanding and empathy towards nature. This representation emphasizes that communication extends beyond verbal proficiency, encompassing emotional expression and understanding.

The climax of the story comes when the children's reflections in the water appear distorted, resembling Mano's facial features. This symbolic scene serves as a metaphor for the universal nature of human experience - beneath the surface, we are all more alike than different. The children's initial fear and subsequent acceptance of their altered reflections symbolize the process of understanding and accepting diversity. This acceptance, however, is not without its complexities. The reflections in the water that momentarily make their faces appear like Mano's highlight an underlying fear of difference that persists in society. The story subtly critiques this fear, suggesting that true acceptance comes from recognizing and embracing our shared humanity.

In conclusion, we could support that the child with disability is depicted in the book under examination in an idealized manner, emphasizing his positive traits and capabilities to counterbalance his disability. This approach, while highlighting his strengths, also raises questions about the conditions under which individuals with disabilities are accepted in society. It suggests that acceptance should not be contingent on compensatory qualities but should be based on inherent human dignity and worth.

The book's focus on school-aged children as protagonists aids in the identification of young readers with the characters. It addresses the discomfort and unfamiliarity that children often feel when encountering individuals who differ from them, providing a narrative that familiarizes and sensitizes them to these differences. Through the story's progression and the shared joy of play, the book effectively educates young readers about empathy, inclusion, and the beauty of diversity.

Neurodiversity in "He" ("Ο Αυτός") written by Petros Poulakis and illustrated by Vassilis Papatsarouchas (2014)

"He" by Petros Poulakis, illustrated by Vassilis Papatsarouchas (2014), offers an insightful exploration into the world of autism through the allegorical journey of a baby turtle. This central character, one of 75 baby turtles, serves as an allegory for the experiences of an autistic person. Unlike

his siblings, He's distinct perception of the world sets him apart, mirroring the often misunderstood and isolated experiences of autistic individuals. The narrative captures the unpredictable and divergent nature of He as he moves against the typical flow of his siblings, highlighting the distinct differences in the way autistic individuals perceive and interact with their environment. For example, while other baby turtles instinctively run towards the sea, He heads towards the mountain, indicating his unique interpretation of the world. Similarly, when faced with danger, unlike his peers who react instinctively, He responds in an unexpected manner, reflecting a different understanding of the concept of caution and danger.

Vagou, He's sister, is a crucial character representing empathy and understanding. Her journey to see the world through He's eyes is a testament to the importance of empathy in bridging communication gaps often faced by autistic individuals. The moment where she discovers the secret of He's shell is particularly poignant. As she ventures into his shell, she realizes that it acts like a magnifying lens, revealing a world fragmented into countless minute details: "Inside his shell, there is an entire world. But it's not as we see it. It's broken into tiny, mixed-up little images. So many that you get lost. It's like you can't see anything whole" (Poulakis & Papatsarouchas, 2014, 19). This scene is expertly crafted to place the reader in the perspective of an autistic child, elucidating behaviors that might otherwise be perceived as selfish, negative, or odd.

Vagou's revelation about the world inside He's shell to the rest of the family is a moment of epiphany. She explains that He sees the world differently -not as a coherent whole but as a jumble of tiny, mixed images. The imagery of the world inside the shell, fragmented into countless small images, is a powerful metaphor for the sensory and cognitive experiences of an autistic person. This depiction helps readers, especially children, understand the overwhelming nature of such sensory inputs and the difficulty in organizing them into an understandable and manageable format. It conveys the complexity and intricacy of how autistic individuals may experience their surroundings, characterized by a heightened focus on details but a challenge in synthesizing these into a cohesive whole.

This discovery allows the family to enter He's world, leading to a deeper understanding and connection. From then on, He becomes happier, enjoying explaining his perceptions, seeking and giving attention, understanding and being understood. His siblings begin to include him, embracing and gently touching him, and He no longer feels alone: "His siblings now wanted him in their company, they embraced him, and he tenderly stroked them with his nose, as if smelling them. He no longer felt alone" (Poulakis & Papatsarouchas, 2014, 23). This book illustrates the challenges faced by autistic individuals, particularly in terms of sensory processing and social interactions. It

underlines the importance of patience, empathy, and the willingness to understand the world from their perspective. The transformation of He's relationship with his family upon their understanding of his unique worldview is a powerful message about acceptance and inclusion.

By stepping into He's world, both characters within the book and the readers learn to appreciate the beauty and complexity of different perspectives. It is a reminder that everyone, regardless of their neurology, has a unique way of seeing the world, and that understanding and embracing these differences can lead to more harmonious and inclusive societies.

Autism, scientifically termed Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), is a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterized by challenges in social interaction, communication, and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities. This condition spans a wide spectrum, where individuals exhibit varying degrees of difficulties and strengths. The American Psychiatric Association's DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition) classifies ASD as a spectrum because of the wide range of symptoms and their severity experienced by individuals.

The portrayal of the protagonist in "He" mirrors several common characteristics associated with autism. The character's unpredictable and distinct actions, such as running towards the mountain while others head to the sea, and his unique reaction to danger, exemplify the diverse and often misunderstood behaviors seen in autistic individuals. These behaviors might be perceived as eccentric or antisocial, but they stem from the character's unique perception and processing of the world around him.

Repetitive behaviors, a core symptom of autism, are illustrated through the protagonist's tendency to repeat phrases. This repetition, as highlighted in the book with the line: "This, this, this, this, this, this..." (Poulakis & Papatsarouchas, 2014, 5) reflects a common trait in autistic people, who often find comfort and stability in repetitive patterns and routines (American Psychiatric Association, DSM-5, 2013).

The character's preference for isolation and avoidance of eye contact, as mentioned, aligns with common social communication challenges in ASD. Autistic individuals often struggle with traditional forms of social interaction, which can include difficulties in making and maintaining eye contact (National Institute of Mental Health). Further, the fragmented perception of the environment, as interpreted from the book's illustrations from the protagonist's perspective, aligns with the theory that autistic people may process sensory information differently, often focusing intensely on certain details while potentially missing the broader context (American Psychiatric Association, DSM-5, 2013).

In “He”, the illustrations by Papatsarouchas play a pivotal role in complementing and enhancing the narrative penned by Petros Poulakis. The use of bright colors effectively mirrors the heightened sensory perceptions often associated with autism. Such vivid and contrasting colors could be interpreted as a reflection of the intense and sometimes overwhelming sensory experiences that individuals with autism may encounter. The choice of a turtle as the central character is symbolically significant. The turtle’s shell can be seen as a metaphor for the protective barrier or personal world that autistic individuals might create for themselves. This world, governed by its own unique rules and perceptions, offers a safe space but also signifies the challenges of connecting with the outside world.

Furthermore, the title itself foreshadows the book’s exploration of autism. Etymologically, the term “autism” is derived from the Greek word “autos” meaning “self”. This origin hints at the core characteristics of autism, which often include a significant focus on the self and a different way of experiencing and interacting with the world. The book’s title, thus, sets the stage for a narrative that delves into the world as perceived and experienced by an autistic person, offering insights into their unique perspective.

The application of the Iconotext Theory to the children’s book under examination offers an insightful way to understand how the interplay between text and image can deepen our comprehension of autism. In “He” the text provides a narrative of the protagonist’s experiences, while the illustrations visually represent his unique perspective. This combination allows readers to engage with the story both intellectually and emotionally, fostering a multi-layered understanding of the character’s world.

A key aspect of the illustrations in “He” is their presentation within white frames, resembling instant photographs or snapshots. This framing technique not only draws attention to each image but also encourages readers to piece together these visual ‘snapshots’. Moreover, the incorporation of text within the illustrations -sometimes as individual words, other times as complete sentences- directly presents the protagonist’s thoughts and perceptions. This technique effectively bridges the gap between the visual and the textual narrative, offering a glimpse into the protagonist’s mind.

“He” reflects the social model of disability, emphasizing societal understanding and acceptance rather than focusing on the ‘problem’. This portrayal is crucial in the cultural context of the story, challenging stereotypes and misconceptions about autism. Instead of viewing autism solely as a disability, He presents it as a different way of experiencing the world, with its own positive aspects.

The book's unique approach in using a turtle to symbolize autism, coupled with the effective use of color and imagery, makes 'He' a profound contribution to Children's Literature. It stands as an exemplary work in promoting the social model of disability, asserting that the challenge lies not in the individual's condition but in society's response to it. In conclusion, the book under examination, is a poignant and insightful exploration of autism. It advocates for a world that embraces diversity and fosters understanding and acceptance. The story of He is not just a tale of overcoming obstacles; it is a call for empathy, a celebration of difference, and a testament to the beauty of seeing the world through varied perspectives.

**Sensory disabilities in “Friends?... Light Lantern”
 (“Φίλοι; Φως φανάρι”), written by Francesca
 Alexopoulou-Petraki and illustrated
 by Maria Tzampoura (2005)**

“Friends?... Light Lantern” written by Francesca Alexopoulou-Petraki and illustrated by Maria Tzampoura, emerges as a significant story within the realm of Children's Literature, particularly in its portrayal of disability. Published in 2005 and recipient of the state illustration award, the book navigates the intricate dynamics of a friendship that blossoms under unconventional circumstances—between Ismene, a preschool girl, and George, a deaf boy from a neighboring school.

The story unfolds with Ismene's mundane routine and her evident disinterest in her daily school life. Her character, initially portrayed as disengaged, undergoes a transformation through her interaction with George, who she first encounters as a face pressed against the window of another school bus. Their friendship, developed across the physical barrier of the bus windows and the metaphorical barrier of George's disability, is marked by non-verbal communication through gestures and drawings, mediated by the changing lights of a traffic signal.

The narrative, conveyed from Ismene's first-person perspective, allows for an intimate glimpse into her thoughts and emotions. This narrative choice, while providing a clear voice to Ismene, raises critical questions about the portrayal of disability through the lens of an able-bodied narrator. The initial focus on Ismene's mundane concerns subtly shifts as she engages with George, revealing the narrative's intent to highlight the process of understanding and accepting difference.

George's character, introduced through Ismene's observations, is a defining element of the story. His deafness, revealed during a school trip to the natural history museum, is a pivotal narrative moment. The author's

approach to introducing George's disability is noteworthy, as it underscores the commonality of their childhood experiences over the differences imposed by his disability. However, this approach also opens the book to critique. Ismene's rapid acceptance of George's disability might be seen as an oversimplification, potentially overlooking the real-world complexities and challenges of disability. The revelation of George's deafness and the subsequent swift acceptance by Ismene could be interpreted as an oversimplification of the complexities involved in interactions across differing abilities. While the narrative succeeds in normalizing disability to an extent, it also risks glossing over the nuances and challenges inherent in such interactions. A critical aspect of the book is its portrayal of the initial unfamiliarity and subsequent acceptance of disability. Ismene's journey from ignorance to awareness reflects a common trajectory in understanding disability. However, this representation also necessitates a critical examination of the societal attitudes towards disability. The narrative, in its effort to promote inclusivity and acceptance, might inadvertently perpetuate the trope of the noble able-bodied who graciously accepts and accommodates the otherness of disability. This perspective, while kindly disposed, risks overshadowing the agency and autonomy of individuals with disabilities, as seen in the portrayal of George's character.

Tzampoura's illustrations enrich the narrative, lending visual depth to the characters' emotions and experiences. The interplay between text and imagery is particularly effective in scenes depicting the silent communication between Ismene and George, emphasizing the power of visual storytelling. The traffic light, a recurring motif, symbolizes the evolving nature of their communication and relationship. However, the reliance on visual metaphors, while artistically commendable, might inadvertently reinforce the notion that non-verbal communication is a simplistic alternative to verbal interaction, potentially underrepresenting the depth and complexity of communication within the deaf community.

The story touches upon themes of disability and inclusion in a manner that is both sensitive and empowering. George's character is initially introduced without reference to his deafness, a narrative choice that aligns with modern perspectives in disability studies that advocate seeing individuals beyond their disabilities. However, this approach is not without its critiques. While the narrative succeeds in normalizing disability to some extent, it risks oversimplifying the complexities involved in interactions across differing abilities.

One of the book's most poignant moments occurs when Ismene first observes a teacher communicating in sign language with a group of children, including George. This encounter is Ismene's—and the reader's—introduction

to George's world. Her initial confusion followed by quick adaptation and acceptance reflects a common human response to unfamiliar situations. However, this portrayal might be seen as overly simplistic, potentially glossing over the nuances and challenges inherent in such interactions. The narrative's rapid shift from ignorance to awareness, while beneficial in promoting inclusivity, may not fully reflect the realities of disability and social integration.

The educational implications of the book are significant. It serves as a vital tool in fostering empathy, understanding, and acceptance among young readers. By encouraging children to see beyond superficial differences and to find common ground with others, the book contributes to the discourse on inclusion and diversity. However, the idealized depiction of disability and the ease of acceptance portrayed in the narrative raise questions about the realism of such interactions in real-life scenarios. The book's optimistic approach, while encouraging acceptance, may not fully prepare young readers for the complexities and potential challenges of engaging with individuals with disabilities.

The conclusion that the author's portrayal of disability in the book as an idealized, somewhat beautified condition reflects a common approach in children's literature is insightful and warrants further discussion. While seeking to normalize disability and promote inclusivity, this approach raises important questions about the challenges of representing disability.

By presenting disability through an idealized lens, the narrative risks simplifying the multifaceted experiences of individuals with disabilities. While this method can be effective in introducing young readers to the concept of diversity and acceptance, it might also inadvertently downplay the real challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. This oversimplification can lead to a somewhat superficial understanding of disability, potentially limiting the depth of empathy and understanding in young readers.

Moreover, such a portrayal might contribute to the creation of far-fetched expectations about disability and the experiences of those living with it. It is crucial for Children's Literature to balance the need for positive representation with the reality of the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities. Stories that acknowledge the challenges, while also highlighting the strengths and achievements of characters with disabilities, can offer a more nuanced and realistic perspective.

In summary, while the book under exploration makes significant strides in presenting disability in an accessible and engaging manner for children, its approach to portraying disability as an idealized condition requires careful consideration. Future narratives in children's literature might benefit

from a more balanced portrayal that embraces both the challenges and the triumphs inherent in the experience of disability. Such narratives can play a crucial role in shaping young readers' understanding of and attitudes toward diversity and inclusivity.

Psychiatric disabilities in Mr. Huff (“Ο κύριος Ουφ”) by Anna Walker (2020)

“Mr. Huff” by Anna Walker (2020) presents an insightful and delicate exploration of childhood depression, intricately woven through a narrative of a young boy, Bill, and his encounter with Mr. Huff, a symbolic representation of his mental state.

The book starts with Bill experiencing a series of unfortunate events, each seemingly insignificant but collectively overwhelming. These incidents bring Mr. Huff to life, a large, grey, formless figure symbolizing the weight and presence of depression. Walker's choice to depict depression as a physically growing and enveloping presence is a profound metaphor for how depression can feel all-consuming and increasingly burdensome. By personifying depression, she presents an accessible concept for children. This representation is a crucial step in demystifying mental health disorders and breaking down associated stigmas.

Throughout the story, Bill's efforts to rid himself of Mr. Huff reflect a common response to depression: the desire to escape or ignore it. However, as Mr. Huff grows larger, it signifies how ignoring or avoiding such feelings often leads to their magnification. This portrayal is crucial in conveying to children that facing one's feelings, however daunting, is a necessary step in dealing with them.

In the book it is mentioned that the character wonders if he is imagining things, highlighting the ambiguity and internal conflict common among individuals grappling with emotional and mental health issues like depression. This line is particularly impactful in the context of a children's book, as it subtly addresses the common but often unspoken confusion that children (and adults) face when dealing with emotions that are hard to understand or express. In the story, Bill's struggle with the tangible yet elusive presence of Mr. Huff, his personal metaphor for depression, leads to moments of doubt and self-questioning, as embodied in this quote. It highlights the internal dialogue that many individuals with depression experience, where they question the validity and reality of their feelings.

Bill's reluctance and inability to talk about Mr. Huff, the manifestation of his depression, is a compelling depiction of how children often grapple with internalizing complex emotions. They might feel an inherent sadness

or discomfort but lack the vocabulary or emotional maturity to express these feelings adequately. The silence and sadness that envelop Bill when he attempts to speak about his experience symbolize the isolation and helplessness that can accompany depression. This narrative element is crucial for young readers to understand that sometimes emotions are hard to put into words, and it's not uncommon to feel tongue-tied or overwhelmed when trying to express deep-seated feelings. He shouts at him: "I hate you Mr. Huff! I wish you were never here" (Walker, 2020, 21-22)

A turning point in the narrative occurs when Bill sees his reflection in Mr. Huff's tears and decides to accept Mr. Huff. This moment of acceptance is critical in the story, symbolizing the acceptance of one's emotions. Walker skillfully uses this moment to illustrate that befriending one's feelings, rather than fighting them, can be a path to understanding and managing them more effectively.

The book's dedication: "If you have felt the clouds when the sky is blue, this book is for you" (Walker, 2020,1) resonates deeply, offering a sense of kinship to those who have experienced similar emotions. It underscores the universality of these feelings, providing comfort and a sense of connection to its readers.

The synergy between Walker's sparse text and the expressive illustrations is a cornerstone. While the words hint at the emotional turmoil, the images, with their subdued color palette and the looming presence of Mr. Huff, intensify the narrative's emotional gravity. This fusion creates an accessible pathway for children to engage with and comprehend the complex subject of depression. Walker's watercolor illustrations complement the narrative beautifully, their subdued and gentle nature mirroring the book's tone. The imagery of Mr. Huff, ever-present yet non-threatening, helps to demystify the concept of depression for young readers. The illustrations also play a critical role in depicting the subtleties of Bill's emotional journey, enhancing the book's impact.

The book concludes on a hopeful note, with the weather still cloudy but with a chance of sunshine. This ending is significant as it offers a realistic portrayal of depression -it may not disappear overnight, because in the morning we see Mr. Huff as a little doll, but there is always hope and potential for better days. This message is especially important for children, providing an optimistic yet realistic perspective on dealing with challenging emotions.

In summary, Anna Walker's "Mr. Huff" is an exceptional piece of Children's Literature that addresses the complex issue of childhood depression in a sensitive, insightful, and accessible manner. Through its compelling narrative and expressive illustrations, the book offers comfort and understanding, making it a crucial tool for children, parents, and