

Students' Reception of Intrinsic Elements and Moral Values in Hans Christian Andersen's The Ugly Duckling

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026 - 06- 08	<i>This study examines students' reception of the intrinsic elements, moral values, and impressions of Hans Christian Andersen's short story The Ugly Duckling. The study responds to the need for literary learning that not only identifies textual elements but also explores how students interpret moral meaning through reader response. A descriptive qualitative design was employed. The participants were 27 second-semester students from class B of the English Education Department at Universitas Muhammadiyah Purworejo in the 2025/2026 academic year. Data were collected from February 24 to March 10, 2026, through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The interview data were transcribed, coded, and interpreted, while the document analysis was used to support the interpretation of intrinsic elements in the short story. The findings show that students identified four main themes: bullying, discrimination, hardness, and the search for self-identity. The main characters identified were the ugly duckling, the mother duck, and the ugly duckling's siblings. Students also recognized several messages, including not judging people by appearance, appreciating differences, avoiding bullying and discrimination, maintaining confidence, being patient, and never giving up. The moral values found in the story were patience, empathy, care, tolerance, justice, and struggle. Students were impressed by the ugly duckling's patience, persistence, and refusal to take revenge. The study implies that The Ugly Duckling can be used as a meaningful literary text to support character education and moral reflection in English literature learning.</i>
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1. Introduction

Literature is an important medium for language learning because it presents language, experience, imagination, and human values in meaningful forms. In English language education, literary texts can help students encounter authentic language, interpret different perspectives, and build interaction with texts, teachers, and peers. Literature also encourages students to think critically, respond

emotionally, and construct meaning through reading activities (Fareh et al., 2022). Therefore, literary works are not only artistic products but also educational resources that can support linguistic, cognitive, emotional, and moral development.

Literary works express human ideas, experiences, and feelings through written or spoken forms (Girsang et al., 2023). They may appear in different genres, including drama, poetry, novels, and short stories. Among these genres, short stories are useful in language learning because they are relatively brief, accessible, and rich in meaning. Short stories can present human experiences in a simple but powerful way and can support students' critical thinking skills (Coşgun, 2022). They also contain intrinsic elements, such as theme, character and characterization, plot, setting, language style, and message (Muhandra et al., 2023). These elements guide readers in understanding how a story is constructed and how meaning is communicated.

In addition to intrinsic elements, literary works often contain moral values. Moral values are related to moral teaching and ethical behavior (Sanjaya et al., 2021). In educational contexts, moral learning is important because it helps students understand ethical principles, social norms, and responsible behavior. Prahaladaiah (2021) argues that the teaching of literature may contribute to value-based education. In higher education, moral learning is also associated with students' moral knowledge and their ability to behave appropriately in social life (Stephens & Tricia, 2024). Bauer and Hermann (2024) further emphasize the importance of moral education in developing ethical awareness and resilience. Through literature, students may reflect on values such as empathy, care, tolerance, justice, responsibility, and struggle (Ahmad, 2021; Chung, 2023).

The Ugly Duckling is a classic short story written by Hans Christian Andersen. The story tells about a young bird hatched in a duck's nest who is considered ugly and different from the other animals. Because of his appearance, he experiences rejection, discrimination, and bullying. After a long struggle, he discovers that he is not a duckling but a beautiful swan. The story is widely recognized for its themes of difference, self-acceptance, transformation, and dignity. For students, this story may become a meaningful text because it offers opportunities to interpret intrinsic elements and moral values through personal and educational perspectives.

This study uses reception theory as the theoretical foundation. Reception theory views literary meaning as a dynamic process created through the interaction between the text and the reader. Meaning is not determined only by the author or by the text itself, but is also shaped by the reader's experience, values, and interpretation. Iser (1987) emphasizes the interaction between text and reader in producing meaning. Holub (1984) explains that reception theory pays attention to how readers process texts and construct interpretation. Literary reception therefore focuses on how readers perceive, appreciate, evaluate, and respond to literary works (Wiyatmi, 2017). Readers may produce different responses because they bring different perspectives and experiences to the text

(Adhitya, 2023; Tamrin et al., 2023; Zahra et al., 2023).

Several previous studies have examined intrinsic elements and moral values in literary works. Sauli et al. (2024) analyzed the intrinsic elements of Sally Rooney's novel *Beautiful World, Where Are You* and identified its theme, characters, plot, point of view, and setting. Arifin et al. (2024) examined moral values in Ahmad Tohari's novel *Orang-Orang Proyek* and found values such as integrity, belief, honesty, solidarity, and justice. Sanjaya et al. (2021) analyzed moral values in *Keluargaku Tak Semurah Rupiah* and found self-awareness, self-introspection, and commitment. These studies show that intrinsic elements and moral values are important topics in literary analysis. However, most of them focus on the textual identification of elements and values, particularly in novels.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on students' reception of a short story. Rather than only identifying intrinsic elements and moral values from the text, this study examines how students interpret themes, characters, messages, moral values, and impressions after engaging with *The Ugly Duckling*. This focus is important because students' responses can show how literary texts function in moral reflection and character education. Therefore, the study contributes to literature teaching by connecting textual analysis, reader reception, and moral learning in an English education context.

2. Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design. Qualitative research is appropriate for exploring participants' responses, meanings, and interpretations in depth (Creswell, 2012). The descriptive qualitative design was used because the study aimed to describe students' reception of the intrinsic elements, moral values, and impressions of *The Ugly Duckling*.

The participants were 27 second-semester students from class B of the English Education Department at Universitas Muhammadiyah Purworejo in the 2025/2026 academic year. The participants were selected through purposive sampling because the study focused on a particular group of students who were involved in responding to the selected short story. The number of participants and the research setting were maintained according to the original study.

The data were collected from February 24 to March 10, 2026. Two techniques were used: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The semi-structured interviews were used to obtain students' responses to the short story. The interview focus covered three main areas: students' reception of intrinsic elements, students' reception of moral values, and students' impressions of the story. The 27 students were divided into five interview groups, with each group consisting of five to six students. The interviews were conducted through Zoom and were recorded. During the interviews, the researchers also took brief notes and used additional questions when deeper information was needed.

Document analysis was used to support the interview findings. The

researchers analyzed the selected version of *The Ugly Duckling* to identify textual evidence related to themes, main characters, characterization, messages, and moral values. This document analysis helped compare students' responses with evidence from the short story. Therefore, the study used methodological triangulation by combining interview data and document analysis.

The interview data were analyzed through three steps. First, the interview recordings were transcribed and read carefully to understand the content. Second, segments of data were coded according to the research focus, including intrinsic elements, moral values, and students' impressions. Third, the coded data were interpreted in relation to reception theory and relevant literature. The document analysis data were analyzed by reading the short story, identifying relevant textual evidence, categorizing the intrinsic elements and moral values, and interpreting them in relation to students' responses. The data analysis followed the qualitative coding and interpretation process described by Naeem et al. (2023).

3. Results

The analysis showed that students identified three main intrinsic elements in the story: themes, characters and characterization, and messages. These elements were interpreted through students' responses and supported by document analysis.

a. Themes

The first theme is bullying. Students stated that the ugly duckling experienced verbal, physical, and social bullying. Verbal bullying appeared when his siblings called him ugly and when the wild ducks insulted him. Physical bullying appeared when the ducks pecked him, the chickens beat him, and the girl who fed the poultry kicked him. Social bullying appeared when other animals avoided him because of his appearance. Students connected this theme with social behavior in academic life. They stated that bullying should be avoided because it hurts others and can leave painful experiences. Some students also related the story to their personal experience of being bullied in elementary school.

One representative response was:

"The first theme of the story is about bullying because the ugly duckling got verbal, physical, and social bullying. The ugly duckling was bullied verbally by his siblings. The wild ducks also said that the ugly duckling was very ugly. The ugly duckling also got physical bullying because the chickens beat him and the ducks pecked him."

(S1, S3, S5, S6, S7, S9, S10, S11, S15, S16, S18, S20, S23, S24, S27)

The second theme is discrimination. Students interpreted discrimination as rejection caused by difference. They explained that the ugly duckling was rejected by his siblings, his mother, the spiteful duck, the hen, and the tomcat. Students also viewed the prohibition against expressing opinions as a form of discrimination because the ugly duckling was judged according to abilities he did not possess. From this theme, students learned that everyone has the right to be treated well

and to express opinions.

The third theme is hardiness. Students stated that the ugly duckling continued struggling although he experienced bullying, rejection, and exclusion. He did not take revenge on those who hurt him and continued searching for a place where he could be accepted. Students interpreted this theme as a lesson about patience, politeness, persistence, and resilience in facing difficulties.

The fourth theme is the search for self-identity. Students explained that the ugly duckling was rejected because of his appearance, but finally discovered that he was a swan. They interpreted this transformation as a process of self-discovery and self-acceptance. Students stated that people should accept themselves, remain confident, and find a positive environment where they are appreciated.

b. Characters and Characterization

Students identified three main characters: the ugly duckling, the mother duck, and the ugly duckling's siblings. The ugly duckling was characterized as polite, grateful, patient, and persistent. Students stated that he remained polite when the wild ducks insulted him. He was also grateful because he believed his ugliness saved him from being bitten by a dog. In addition, he never gave up although he was bullied and rejected in several places. Students interpreted the ugly duckling as a protagonist from whom they could learn positive values.

The mother duck was interpreted as a character who initially accepted and protected the ugly duckling. Students noted that she introduced him to the farmyard and defended him when other ducks rejected him. However, students also stated that the mother duck later rejected him. They interpreted this change as being influenced by the surrounding environment.

The ugly duckling's siblings were characterized as unkind, lacking empathy, and intolerant of difference. Students stated that the siblings insulted him, rejected him, and treated him badly because of his appearance. From these antagonist characters, students learned that bullying, discrimination, and humiliation should be avoided.

c. Messages

Students identified five main messages from the story. First, people should not judge others by appearance because inner qualities are more important than outer appearance. Second, people should appreciate others and avoid discrimination. Third, bullying should not be practiced because it can cause sadness, low self-confidence, and emotional pain. Fourth, people should not be afraid of being different and should remain confident. Fifth, people should be patient and never give up when facing difficulties.

These messages show that students did not only identify the story's moral statements but also connected them with behavior in social and academic life.

d. Students' Reception of Moral Values

Students identified six moral values in *The Ugly Duckling*: patience, empathy, care, tolerance, justice, and struggle. Patience was identified through the ugly duckling's ability to endure bullying, rejection, and discrimination. Students viewed patience as an important value when facing problems and sorrow.

Empathy was identified as the ability to understand and support others, especially those who are different. Students explained that the story shows the negative effects of lacking empathy through the actions of the ugly duckling's siblings. This finding is related to Ahmad's (2021) view that empathy is one of the moral values in literature.

Care was identified through the action of the peasant who saved the ugly duckling during winter and brought him to his wife. Students interpreted this action as an example of helping someone in need. This finding supports Ahmad's (2021) explanation that care is a moral value found in literary works.

Tolerance was identified through students' interpretation of difference and acceptance. Students stated that people should not force others to do things beyond their ability. They referred to the hen and the tomcat, who expected the ugly duckling to lay eggs or purr. This value is related to Chung's (2023) explanation that tolerance is an important moral value.

Justice was identified through the students' view that everyone has the same right to be treated well and accepted in society. Students interpreted the ugly duckling's experience of bullying and discrimination as unfair treatment. This finding is consistent with Ahmad (2021) and Arifin et al. (2024), who mention justice as a moral value in literature. Struggle was identified through the ugly duckling's effort to continue searching for a place where he could be accepted. Students viewed struggle as the ability to continue trying despite rejection and difficulty.

e. Students' Impressions of the Story

Students were impressed by the main character because the ugly duckling remained patient, persistent, and non-revengeful despite experiencing verbal, physical, and social bullying. They stated that the story represented the feelings of people who feel different, unaccepted, or unappreciated. Some students felt connected to the ugly duckling because he continued struggling even when many places rejected him.

Students interpreted the ending of the story as a symbol of happiness, self-acceptance, and personal development. They explained that the ugly duckling's transformation into a beautiful swan was not only a physical change but also a shift in how a person understands personal value. The ending suggests that someone may be valuable even when others fail to recognize that value.

Students also stated that the story influenced their views about difference and

acceptance. They learned that difference is not a negative condition and that people should not be judged based on appearance. They emphasized that real acceptance means recognizing a person's character and potential, not only their external condition.

4. Discussion

The findings show that students actively constructed meaning from *The Ugly Duckling* by connecting the intrinsic elements of the story with moral reflection. This supports reception theory, which emphasizes that meaning is produced through interaction between text and reader (Iser, 1987; Holub, 1984). Students did not only identify themes, characters, and messages; they also interpreted these elements based on personal experience, social awareness, and educational values. This confirms that literary reception can vary because readers bring their own perspectives and experiences into the reading process (Wiyatmi, 2017).

The theme of bullying was strongly recognized by students. Their responses show that they understood bullying not only as an event in the story but also as a social problem that can occur in real life. The identification of verbal, physical, and social bullying indicates that students were able to interpret the story in a detailed and reflective way. Some students connected the story with their own past experiences, showing that literary texts can become a space for emotional recognition and moral reflection. This finding supports the idea that literature encourages students to respond emotionally and critically to texts (Fareh et al., 2022).

The theme of discrimination was also central to students' reception. Students interpreted rejection, humiliation, and the denial of the ugly duckling's right to express opinions as forms of discrimination. This interpretation shows that students used the story to reflect on equality, difference, and social acceptance. Their responses suggest that literature can help students develop awareness of inclusive behavior and respect for diversity.

The findings on hardiness and self-identity further show that students interpreted the ugly duckling as a figure of resilience and self-discovery. The ugly duckling's persistence, patience, and refusal to take revenge were interpreted as positive qualities. His transformation into a swan was understood as a symbol of personal growth and self-acceptance. This interpretation demonstrates how students' reception moved beyond literal understanding toward moral and psychological meaning.

The moral values identified by students—patience, empathy, care, tolerance, justice, and struggle—are consistent with previous literature on moral values in literary works. Ahmad (2021) mentions empathy, care, and justice as moral values in literature, while Chung (2023) emphasizes tolerance. Arifin et al. (2024) also identify justice as an important moral value in literary analysis. In this study, these values were not only identified from the text but were also interpreted through

students' responses. This strengthens the contribution of the study because it shows how students receive moral values through literary engagement.

The findings also have implications for literature teaching. The Ugly Duckling can be used as a teaching material to discuss intrinsic elements, moral values, bullying, discrimination, self-confidence, and self-acceptance. In an English education context, the story may help students practice literary interpretation while also developing character awareness. Teachers and lecturers can use guided questions, group discussion, and reflective writing to help students connect textual evidence with moral interpretation.

However, this study has limitations. It involved only 27 students from one class and focused on one short story. The findings therefore cannot be generalized to all students or all literary learning contexts. In addition, the study focused on students' reception of selected intrinsic elements, moral values, and impressions. Future studies may involve more participants, different literary texts, or comparative analysis across different student groups.

5. Conclusion

This study examined students' reception of the intrinsic elements, moral values, and impressions of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Ugly Duckling*. The findings show that students identified four major themes: bullying, discrimination, hardness, and the search for self-identity. They also identified three main characters: the ugly duckling, the mother duck, and the ugly duckling's siblings. The messages found in the story include not judging people by appearance, appreciating others, avoiding discrimination and bullying, accepting difference, maintaining confidence, being patient, and never giving up.

The moral values identified by students were patience, empathy, care, tolerance, justice, and struggle. Students were impressed by the ugly duckling's patience, persistence, and refusal to take revenge despite experiencing bullying and rejection. They also interpreted the ending as a symbol of self-acceptance, personal growth, and the discovery of one's value.

The study concludes that *The Ugly Duckling* is a meaningful short story for literature learning because it supports students' understanding of intrinsic elements and moral values. It can also encourage moral reflection, empathy, tolerance, and awareness of difference. The study contributes to English literature teaching by showing how reader reception can be used to explore the relationship between literary interpretation and character education.

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