

**Becoming the Swan: The Lacanian Mirror Stage and
The Illusion of Identity in *The Ugly Duckling***

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes Hans Christian Andersen's *The Ugly Duckling* through Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, highlighting how identity is shaped by external perceptions and societal acceptance. Using psychoanalytic criticism, the research investigates how the duckling's self-image is formed and transformed through rejection, mockery, and eventual recognition. The findings show that: **1)** the duckling initially perceives himself as ugly because of repeated rejection and labeling from those around him; **2)** he embarks on a journey in search of acceptance, during which his self-esteem is eroded by constant mockery and social exclusion; and **3)** his confidence and self-perception improve only after his physical transformation into a swan, which aligns with societal beauty standards. This study underscores how children's literature can illuminate the deep psychological impact of social judgment and offers an important reminder to support children in developing positive self-concepts, regardless of appearance.

Keywords: *The Ugly Duckling, Lacan, mirror stage, psychoanalytic criticism, identity, children's literature, self-perception, beauty standards*

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of Children's literature is to enlighten young readers about real life, in a way that they can comprehend. Over time, readers will gradually develop the ability to engage with literature in certain ways. Children's Literature provides valuable life lessons and life problems that young readers may gain and face in their future. *The Ugly Duckling* is a children's book that was originally published in 1843 by a Danish author and poet, Hans Christian Andersen. Published in 1843, *The Ugly Duckling* is a children's storybook that discusses multiple deep topics. The first edition of the

book consists of 32 pages. This Children's Literature is familiar with many audiences, primarily with children or young readers. Children's Literature has a variety of issues that readers may relate to in real life. In the end, it teaches valuable life lessons that young readers may gain in life.

The Ugly Duckling tells about the journey of a little duckling who feels out of place, but later on accepts who he is and finds out he is a beautiful little duckling. This book is usually read to kids with the aim to teach them that *'being an outcast because of something someone cannot control, is not their fault.'* Andersen created this tale to teach the audience about the importance of self-acceptance. Themes in this book include bullying, self-loathing, and much more. But it emphasizes being your authentic self, no matter what others think. In the end of the story, it gives a reflection that one is what makes oneself special from everyone else. This also makes a good point to children that the personality of a person (inside) matters just as much as the looks (outside). This simple yet heart-warming tale has touched readers for generations, and will continue to be one of the most memorable stories that teaches readers about the importance of self-acceptance. Around 42% of students in Indonesia aged 15 years have experienced violence (Asyifah, Firmansyah, Budiman, 2024). This is a viable reason for people to speak up for them. Kids cannot speak and stand up for themselves most of the time, that is why someone else must take that place to protect them.

The main theory used in this analysis is Psychoanalytic Criticism, to break down the thoughts of the characters in the book. Psychoanalysis was first found by Sigmund Freud in 1896. However, this analysis uses Jacques Lacan (Freudian), who explored the *"mirror stage"* in his 1949 work, titled *"The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function."* Jacques Lacan is a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist, and is widely considered to be one of the most influential figures in psychoanalysis after Freud. Jacques Lacan began writing about psychoanalytic theory in the 1930s. The mirror theory of which proposes the connection of the child's mind to the outside. *"The function of the mirror stage is to establish a relationship between the organism and its reality."* (Lacan, 1949, pg.4)

In a comparable story that has similar key points (*beauty standards, societal acceptance, and being yourself*), *"Beauty and the Beast"* by Walt Disney Pictures (1991). These stories traverse the journey of overcoming what society has thought of one as, and leaving that shell, overcoming what an average civil person thinks as absolutely vile or captivatingly beautiful. This makes a striking similarity between the two. *"Beast's Masculinity In The "Beauty And The Beast" Selected Versions"* by Ovi Winda Vristian (2019). Their research serves about the outcome after being cursed, leading him to become a heinous beast, and how others act towards him based on his changed appearance. Within the context of beauty, *The Ugly Duckling* and *The Beauty and the Beast* shows the viewer that beauty is in oneself. *The Beast* and *The Duckling* are both similarly seen as horrid in a parallel. They

are shunned, their names flow through the whispers of the one's around them, cursing them while they try to survive and live as they are. In the end, they both were given the same fate, becoming something new, and 'beautiful' in the eyes of society.

In contrast, this analysis serves to dive deeper into the key points that make *The Ugly Duckling* such a beloved tale, discussing the alternative story, where there is no one to support the main character, *The Duckling*. This analysis' objective is to explore the main themes, such as the journey for identity, and the impact of finding 'self-acceptance.' This analysis will also look closely at the message that *The Ugly Duckling* is trying to convey. By examining these points, readers may gain deeper understanding why this story still remains as a beloved and inspiring piece that teaches valuable life lessons, and it continues to have a connection with readers of all ages. This study's purpose is to dive into multiple ways society victimizes people based on their appearance, branching to the complex reasons behind one's actions, responses, and such.

Binary Opposition

<i>Acceptance</i>	<i>Rejection</i>
<p>The little duckling did not realize that he had grown up and his physical appearance had changed. He then met a group of beautiful ducklings, and he wanted to befriend them. Although he was afraid of getting rejected because of his 'ugly' appearance. To his surprise, the beautiful swans befriended him and called him a 'beautiful' duckling. He was now accepted by society due to a change in his appearance, as his physical appearance now fitted the social beauty standards.</p> <p><i>"The white birds smile. They like the duckling"</i> – Page 24.</p>	<p>When the little duckling was little, he was born different from his other siblings. His siblings were beautiful little ducklings, yet the little duckling was 'different' and considered 'ugly'. Due to his different appearance, he was rejected by society.</p> <p><i>"Oh no! This duckling is ugly!" shouts the mother duck"</i> – Page 5.</p>

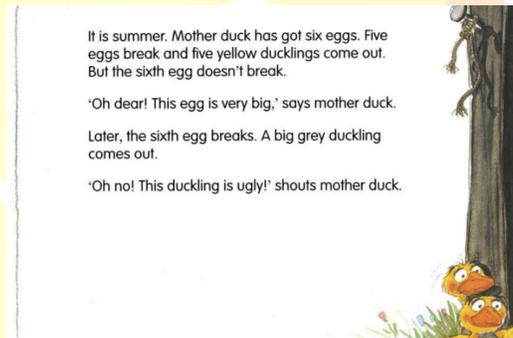
METHOD

The research was conducted using the approach of *Psychoanalytic Criticism*, breaking down the internal thought processes of characters in this book. As well as a dive into beauty standards and its effects on the character's perception of themselves and others based on their mindset and personality. How society and their environment have shaped them to work. Lacan's book titled, "*The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function*" was used as the main theory to analyze the behaviors

and thoughts of the characters in the book. According to Lacan, “*The function of the mirror stage is to establish a relationship between the organism and its reality.*” (Lacan, 1949, pg.4) The mirror stage links the child to his inner world (body, mind, instincts) and the outer world (societal expectations). The mirror stage occurs between the ages (6 and 18 months) and it is when the child first recognizes their image in the mirror as a ‘*whole*’, despite it still being uncoordinated in their movements. Lacan has also quoted, “*The mirror stage is where the individual assumes the image, and it becomes the matrix of all subsequent identifications.*” (Lacan, 1949, pg. 2) The mirror stage is crucial for an individual. How the child sees itself in the mirror, or by other individual’s opinions about the child’s image, will take a toll on how the child perceives its own image. This moment of recognition leads to the formation of the *ego*. The *ego* is built through *identification* with the reflected image. Such methods took in references to many literature books and works that specified each method to get a clear, unbiased, objective viewpoint in this analysis.

DISCUSSION

The story begins with a mother duckling that has six eggs, each hatching one by one. The mother duckling is overjoyed when her six ducklings hatch, yet the mother duck is confused once she notices that one of her ducklings looks different than the others. The page then focuses on the mother duckling shouting at the little duckling, while his siblings stay behind her. The little ‘*ugly*’ duckling has a shade of brown-colored feathers



which can be seen clearly in the book, as his siblings were orange-colored. “*Self-concept is a socio-cognitive construct that develops from both cognitive maturation and social experiences*” (Harter, 1999/2012; van der Aar et al., 2018). The little duckling’s sense of identity is not fixed but shaped by his interactions with others. Just as children develop their self-concept through feedback and socialization, the duckling internalizes rejection as part of his identity. This represents how the little ‘*ugly*’ duckling is different in appearance from his siblings. Making him the ‘*ugly*’ one as he is not colored orange like the typical duck. His face shows an expression of nervousness, as he is feeling so due to being criticized for his own looks by his own mother. While his siblings first have a look of worry and curiosity for the little duckling, seeing that he is different from them. “*Oh no! This duckling is ugly!*” (Heath, 2006, p.5) the mother duck shouted. Though the duckling was just born, he

was already discriminated against by his own mother and siblings. The next page then focuses on the little duckling and the neighbor hen. The little ducklings, including the little ‘ugly’ duckling, are walking in a straight line behind their mother. They all hold their heads high, with a look of annoyance in them that is centered on the little ‘ugly’ duckling. As if trying to say that they are perfect and beautiful, while the little ‘ugly’ duckling is ugly. Then the neighbor hen laughed, because the little duckling is ugly and different from his siblings and mother.

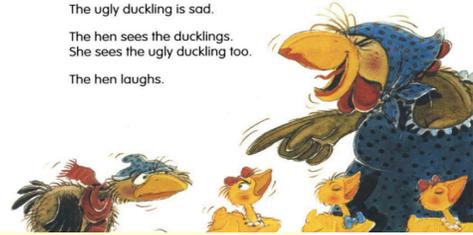
‘Come on, ducklings. Let’s go and visit the hen,’ says mother duck.

She looks at the ugly duckling and she says, ‘Walk behind your brothers and sisters. I don’t want anybody to see you. You’re ugly!’

The ugly duckling is sad.

The hen sees the ducklings. She sees the ugly duckling too.

The hen laughs.



The neighbor hen is making fun of the little duckling’s looks, all the while the hen itself is similar in looks with the little ‘ugly’ duckling. They both are colored brown instead of orange. The little duckling can not do anything about the hen discriminating against him, but stays quiet, given that not only does the duckling’s mother and siblings criticize him for being ugly, but the little duckling’s neighbor as well. Perhaps it is to project, since the neighbor herself was similar in looks to the duckling, further confusing the duckling on why he, *specifically*, was considered ugly. This takes a toll on how the little duckling perceives itself.

The ‘*mirror*’ stage, which is a ‘*mirror*’ that can be a literal mirror or an external representation of how the duckling will perceive its own image. And since the other beings around the little duckling have told him that he is ‘*ugly*’ and he is socially rejected, the little duckling’s identity is then formed negatively through social rejection, as he is called ‘*ugly*’ and ‘*different*’ than the others. Lacan’s mirror stage theory explains how these rejections impacts the little duckling’s self perception, and how he starts seeing himself as an ‘*ugly*’ duckling, just how society reflects his image back to him. “*Children build self-concept through relationships, feedback, social comparisons, and cultural values.*” (Child Development, 2017) This aligns directly with the duckling’s situation. Constant rejection and mockery act as “feedback” that shapes his negative self-image, showing how societal voices play a formative role in children’s identity. The moment he ‘*recognizes*’ himself as an ugly duckling, his *ego* then starts to form through identification from its ‘*reflected*’ image.

It reassures him that he does not fit *their* standard of what it means to be beautiful. “*Upkept, bright, tidy, small and light.*” These sort of traumatic events lead him to have a shattered confidence at his growing stage, not once has he doubted the words of his perpetrators as he has no one to reassure him that his beauty is not to be measured by *their* eyes, but *his*. Even when one of his tormentors is to be illustrated as similar-looking to him. “*Cultural identity is fluid and constructed through social interaction and communication*” (Collier & Thomas, 1980s; Ting-Toomey, 2005). The

duckling's "identity" as ugly is not an intrinsic fact but a social construction. This mirrors how cultural identities are shaped by the dominant voices around individuals rather than inherent qualities.

After that very day, the little duckling flees his home, as he cries because nobody wants to befriend him and because nobody likes him. The duckling walks and walks, yet no matter who he

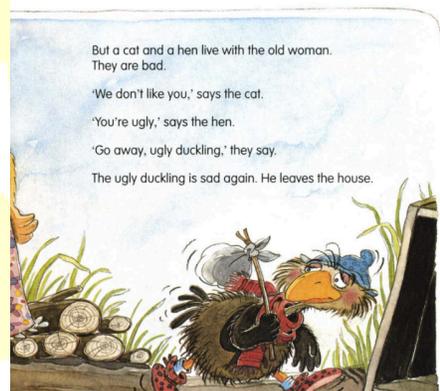
The ugly duckling is afraid. He hides in the grass. The big dog runs into the grass. It sees the ugly duckling. It smells the ugly duckling, but it goes away.
'The dog doesn't like me because I'm ugly,' says the ugly duckling.



meets along the way, none likes him. Throughout the story, the confidence shattering is seen happening. He has made some efforts to socialize and interact with others. Only after he has been shut down so many times does he stop trying altogether. "Identity development is dynamic, involving exploration and commitment, with significant effects on psychological and academic outcomes" (Branje et al., 2021; Umaña-Taylor & Rivas-Drake, 2021). The duckling's "exploration" (leaving home, meeting others) and final

"commitment" (acceptance as a swan) parallel adolescent identity formation. The story models the struggles of developing a stable self-image under social pressure. It seems to him no one wants him. His mind starts to associate how when someone even shows slight disinterest in him, it is because of how he is physically unpleasant to the eye. A remote example of this exact mindset is when the duckling is chased by a dog, but it does not want to eat him. His mind immediately associates the disinterest of the dog and somehow connects it to his features. The page then shows the little duckling hiding behind the tall green grass as he uses his two little hands to shield himself. He is crouching down in fear all the while he is feeling sad, as shown in the page and the dialogs in it. He thinks that because of his 'ugly' appearance, even the dog that has wanted to eat him does not end up eating him because of how he looks. The dog that has been chasing the little duckling earlier is no longer interested in him. He becomes disinterested because of something else, and not because of the little duckling's looks. Yet the little duckling immediately associates it with his looks.

But a cat and a hen live with the old woman.
They are bad.
'We don't like you,' says the cat.
'You're ugly,' says the hen.
'Go away, ugly duckling,' they say.
The ugly duckling is sad again. He leaves the house.



This of course, made any small efforts of being happy an unrealistic point at this point in the story. A short part in the story where he has a stable communication is when the old lady offers him food. Even then it is offered in a pitiful tone and scene, given she is sympathetic to the duckling. "You're a funny duckling," says the old woman (Heath, 2006, pg.13). The words of the old woman

stuck to him. It seems as though, that is a small bit of hope in the duckling's mind, he is happy for once. Though his happiness does not last long with the appearance of the hen and cat the lady owns. When the duck enters the house, he sees that there is a cat and a hen that she owns, then the fierce-looking cat and hen make fun of him, mocking his appearance relentlessly. According to Lacan, *“The child’s identity becomes fractured when faced with aggression and rejection from others, leading to the internalization of a negative self-image”* (Lacan, 1949, p.9). The page shows how the little duckling’s spirit is yet broken again once the cat and the hen that the old woman owns, criticizes his appearance. It is seen when the little duckling has a sad look on his face as he is frowning, while he carries his things to leave the old woman’s house. *“You’re ugly,”* says the cat (Heath, 2006, pg.16). *“Go away, ugly duckling,”* says the hen (Heath, 2006, p.16). The little duckling’s self image continues to form negatively as he faces rejection from society and their expected ‘beauty’ standards. *“Parents with high self-concept clarity transmit greater clarity to their children over time.”* (Crocetti, Rubini et al., 2016). The duckling’s mother calling him “ugly” is the opposite, her rejection transmits confusion and insecurity. This shows how parental validation or criticism powerfully shapes a child’s self-concept. *“Upkept, bright, tidy, small and light.”* And with his lingering self-consciousness resurfacing, he takes his bags and hopes, and leaves. He looks back towards the cat and the hen once more, showing a look of discontent as his spirit is truly broken.

The little duckling’s *ego* continues to form through its reflected image, and the duckling identifies the images as their ‘true’ self. And the *ego* is the source of both *empowerment* and *fragility*. In this context, the *ego* of the little duckling is the source of his fragility. The *image-based ego* is dependent on external validation and is vulnerable to instability. What others perceive him as, is what he believes he is as.

Autumn comes, and so do the swans. The duckling stares in awe at the beautiful white swans that fly high. He silently admires them, perhaps wondering if there will be a time, a way that he can be like them, being a creature someone looks up to in beauty, instead of being looked down on in disgust, halting the ducklings' never ending journey for acceptance. *“Self-concept consists of social, academic, family, and personal dimensions, all influenced by how children evaluate themselves and how others perceive them”* (Harter & Leahy, 2001; Resett et al., 2016). The duckling’s rejection from family, peers, and strangers illustrates that all dimensions of identity (family bonds, peer relations, personal self-worth) can collapse when a child is socially excluded. The little duckling’s identity becomes mediated by how he is seen by others, as he fosters a lifelong quest for approval and social validation. *“The ability to take another’s perspective is essential for moral and identity development.”* (Selman; Bandura, 1977). The duckling is unable to see beyond society’s rejection, he

fully accepts their perspective as truth. Lacan's mirror stage and role-taking theory together explain why negative external reflections dominate his identity. His *ego* is still not yet fed, as he is still socially rejected. But soon winter comes, and it is cold and snow falls from the sky. The winter months are long and indeed very cold, yet the little duckling remains sad. Yet not long after, spring comes and it is now sunny. The little duckling can go out and the beautiful white birds have come back. *"Those birds are beautiful, but I'm ugly,"* says the little duckling (Heath, 2006, pg.21). Not once has the perception of himself changed.

The little duckling has come out of his little house to see the beautiful swans, and he has wished to befriend them despite his 'ugly' appearance. The little duckling greets the swans in hopes of befriending them, and he has introduced himself as an 'ugly' duck who wishes to befriend them. Yet a thing or two change, the beautiful swans do not run away and instead they smile and it seems that they like the little duckling. *"Through imaginative play, children develop social skills, empathy, and self-understanding."* (Ginsburg, 2007; Ashiabi, 2007). The duckling lacks positive play or bonding opportunities with siblings and peers, worsening his isolation. Play could have helped him negotiate identity more positively. In response to the little duckling calling himself 'ugly', the beautiful swan immediately replied, *"You aren't ugly. Look at your face in the water;"* (Heath, 2006, pg.25). The page then focuses on the little duckling who is looking at his own reflection in the water. As shown in the page, the little duckling is no longer brown in colour, and instead is white just like the beautiful swans. He is colored white like the two other swans to show that he is just like them. A



beautiful white swan. The little duckling is drawn to be looking into the water in order to see his own reflection, which is a way of saying that he was in disbelief. He does not believe that he is as beautiful as them, so he looks at his own reflection in the water to confirm it. And when he looks at his own reflection, he is pleased as a pink hue creeps up to his cheeks to show that he is happy. He is the same in appearance as the beautiful swans. To the little duckling's surprise, he is no longer ugly. He is a beautiful swan just like them! The ugly duckling is a swan! *"This shift marks the moment where the subject re-identifies itself based on a new idealized image, completing the process of ego formation"* (Lacan, 1949, p.7). The little duckling's realization of his new appearance causes a shift in his self-identity. According to Lacan, this is the concept of *re-identification* through a new self-image. Now the little duckling has identified himself as one who fits the societal beauty norms, as he is now a beautiful white swan.

“The subject’s ego is reinforced when it conforms to the symbolic expectations of the society that defines beauty” (Lacan, 1949, p. 8). The little duckling’s acceptance depends on his physical transformation, which aligns with society’s norms of beauty. This quote emphasizes the role of societal beauty standards in determining how one feels about itself. The little duckling’s *ego* is then affirmed and strengthened by adjusting to societal norms, and in this case, physical beauty and appearance. The little duckling could finally be accepted in society, as he now ‘fits’ into the societal beauty expectations. He is no longer laughed at, and he is now loved by all. *“Supportive multicultural climates and critical consciousness education foster positive cultural identity development in students.”* (Moscardino et al., 2023; Schachner et al., 2016, 2021). A contrasting case, if the duckling had grown up in a supportive environment, his self-concept would have been affirmed earlier. This highlights how educational and social contexts can either damage or empower identity. The new swan remembers all the sad days, but refuses to be angered by it. As he now has lots of new friends and is very happy. *“The function of the mirror stage is to establish a relationship between the organism and its reality.”* (Lacan, 1949, pg.4). This quote demonstrates how there is a psychological shift in the little duckling’s identity. Lacan’s theory about the ego forming through a relationship with external reality is proved here, when the little duckling formed a new self-image based on his acceptance by society which is based on society’s beauty norms.

“The subject’s understanding of self is ultimately forged through the interaction of hardship and the discovery of its true image” (Lacan, 1949, p.10). The little duckling’s realization has made a resolution to his identity crisis, which emphasizes Lacan’s point of view that identity is shaped through the hardships that each individual faces, and lastly through societal acceptance. *“Dual identification with both heritage and host culture can be a resource for adolescents’ adjustment.”* (Baumert et al., 2023). The duckling’s identity crisis resonates with immigrant or bicultural children, he feels *“between worlds”* until he finds belonging with the swans. This illustrates the importance of identity integration for well-being.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, taking into consideration the intact research, the little duckling’s growth had been stunted by his environment. From those who were meant to take care of him, to those who had ill intentions for him from the very start. At one point, the little duckling has thought that a man wants to help him, yet again he is unaccepted as the man wants to eat him. They all participate in his ego’s crumblance, misleading him into a societal pit of social standards, this alone, is enough to stunt him.

The little duckling believes and perceives himself as an ugly duck, due to the perception and sayings of the ones around him. Even those who are meant to take care of him and raise him, have always discriminated against the little duckling. This is where the little duckling's *identity* starts to form negatively. He goes on a journey searching for 'acceptance' by society as well as himself. The *ego* of the little duckling then starts to form, *wanting* and *needing* to be accepted by society's beauty standards. His *ego* will not be fed if his appearance and he himself is not yet accepted by society. The little duckling finally manages to be confident and truly happy once his physical appearance changes, once he finds out he is actually a beautiful swan. His *ego* is finally fed as he finally is accepted by society, both animals and humans.

It is concluded that other people's perception and opinions about an individual is crucial during the first few months of their life. As it marks how the individual will perceive themselves is based on how others perceive them. This challenged a developing stage of the little duckling, in accordance with Lacan's theory, 'The Mirror Stage'. The part of his mind that controls his own perception of self, has damaged his abilities to thoroughly differ what his own reality is without any outsider bias that society has given him. It gives the idea that if there is a 'disturbance' during the *mirror stage*, it can greatly impact how the child will behave and think.

Though, this story shows the impact of having a good support system of people who accept individuals. The geese are understanding, not judging him for things he cannot control. The interaction gave him a taste of having an *ego*, a well managed and proper self esteem. "Hello, I'm ugly, but please be my friends," says the little duckling. "You aren't ugly. Look at your face in the water," says the swan. Then the little duckling looks at the puddle and he is surprised, because his physique has changed. He becomes normal to the usual goose, because he is one of them. This is a place where he belongs. Not with anyone who makes fun of him, his mother, siblings, dogs, cats, and men; a house where someone is not accepted is not a home.

"It is only with the heart that one can see clearly, for the most essential things are invisible to the eye."

- Hans Christian Andersen, The Ugly Duckling -

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