

Teaching Values through Animation: Analyzing Family Dynamics in *Encanto* for Character Education

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Article Info

Article history:

Accepted: 20 November 2025

Publish: 05 December 2025

Keywords:

Animated movie

Childhood character education

Communication

Emotional development

Values

Abstract

Character education plays a significant role in shaping children's moral and emotional development. As digital media continues to influence young audiences, animated films have become an effective platform for teaching essential values through storytelling and character representation. This study explores Encanto (2021), a Disney animated film that presents a multigenerational family navigating emotional expectations, communication struggles, and self-discovery. The purpose of this study is to analyze how Encanto can be used as a medium to support character education, particularly by examining family communication and its impact on individual growth and resilience. This qualitative research applies the theory of Mise en Scène by Manon de Reeper to analyze visual elements and Family Systems Theory by Murray Bowen to examine the emotional dynamics and communication patterns within the Madrigal family. Selected scenes from the film are analyzed to identify core values such as empathy, responsibility, emotional honesty, and mutual respect. The findings show that Encanto offers strong educational potential for promoting character values and healthy communication practices, making it a relevant resource for educators, parents, and practitioners in early childhood education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Character education remains a fundamental pillar in the formation of children's moral and emotional development. According to Sihombing [1], building character values is highly fundamental for the growth of children. His perspective is aligned with Thomas Lickona [2], who emphasized that character education fosters core values such as respect, responsibility, fairness, and empathy—qualities that are essential in shaping young individuals into morally grounded members of society. Berkowitz and Bier [3] also argue that effective character education must be embedded not only in formal instruction but also in environments that model positive relationships and moral behavior.

Language education is essential, particularly for children [1], as it enhances both communication and value internalization through media exposure. As modern learners are increasingly immersed in digital media, scholars emphasize the need to explore new modes of value transmission, including through visual narratives in popular culture [4]–[6]. Film is known as a medium that presents a topic or message in a light manner so that the audience can understand it [7]. Animated films, in particular, have become effective tools for teaching character values due to their visual appeal, narrative simplicity, and emotional accessibility [8], [12].

Aligned with this perspective, it is important to note that elementary school students need reading and learning materials that are both interesting and relevant to their curriculum. Ideally, such materials can complement existing schoolbooks and support children's holistic development [9].

Moreover, media plays a vital role in stimulating students' motivation to learn, especially when it is thoughtfully integrated into the learning environment [10]. In the context of global education trends, many developed countries have entered the Society 5.0 era, and Indonesia also has the opportunity to prepare its younger generation through strategic educational efforts. This requires a future-oriented approach, especially in preparing millennial teachers especially those born between 1981 and 2000 who represent the country's demographic bonus and productive age group [11]. These teachers are expected to bridge traditional values and modern learning strategies, including the use of digital storytelling like animated films, to promote character development in meaningful and relatable ways.

Numerous studies have explored the role of media in character education. Wiersma [5] analyzed how gender roles are constructed in children's films, while Maity [6] examined Disney narratives as tools for social and moral learning. Arif and Saputra [12] also explored the use of animated films in promoting cultural and moral values in Indonesian EFL classrooms. More recently, Nugroho and Wijaya [8] investigated emotional intelligence development through *Inside Out*, noting that animation can support the emotional literacy of young learners. A similar study by Sihombing and Lestari [13] analyzed the Indonesian animated film *Si Entong*, showing how it represents national identity through traditional clothing and local cultural elements. The study found that such films can be used to introduce character and cultural values to young viewers in a relatable and visual format. Furthermore, Santosa and Sihombing [14] emphasized that students' learning outcomes are not only shaped by teaching strategies and motivation, but also by the cultural environment in which they learn indicating that media reflecting cultural identity may enhance the effectiveness of character education.

Building upon these perspectives, this study focuses on *Encanto* (Disney, 2021) [15], a film that has gained attention for its emotional depth and representation of multigenerational family dynamics. While each member of the Madrigal family is given a magical gift, the central character, Mirabel, stands out for not receiving one. Scholars such as González [16] and Saldaña [17] note that this absence becomes symbolic of emotional invisibility and social exclusion within the family unit. The film reflects broader issues of emotional suppression, family pressure, and intergenerational trauma. All of which are common themes in family psychology and education [18]–[20].

To examine the deeper meanings embedded in the film, this study applies *Mise en Scène* theory and Family Systems Theory. *Mise en Scène*, as explained by Reeper [21], refers to the arrangement of visual elements such as setting, color, lighting, costume, and spatial organization which together produce symbolic meaning and emotional tone. In the context of animation, Giannetti [22] asserts that every visual detail is intentionally crafted to evoke particular responses, making animated films ideal for visual analysis. For example, in *Encanto*, the visual metaphor of the family's magical house cracking illustrates the underlying fragility of their relationships. This use of symbolic imagery supports the idea that visual literacy is essential to moral interpretation [23], [24].

In addition, this study employs Family Systems Theory by Bowen [18], which views the family as an emotional unit, where individual identity and behavior are shaped through interaction patterns within the family system. Bowen's concepts of differentiation of self, emotional cutoff, triangulation, and family roles are particularly useful in analyzing *Encanto*. For instance, Luisa's hyper-responsibility and Isabela's perfectionism exemplify rigid family roles that suppress personal authenticity, aligning with Bowen's notion of emotional fusion. Goldenberg and Goldenberg [20] emphasize that children in enmeshed families often struggle to express themselves freely due to implicit emotional rules and inherited expectations. According to Titelman [25], unresolved emotional issues are often passed down across generations, a theme central to *Encanto*'s storyline.

Despite the growing body of research on character education and media analysis, existing literature often isolates either the moral content of animated films or their psychological effects without integrating family communication as a central theme. For example, while Arif and Saputra

[12] explored how animated films promote moral learning in EFL classrooms, and Nugroho and Wijaya [8] analyzed emotional literacy development, neither study addressed how family discourse within these narratives affects character formation. Furthermore, although *Encanto* has been praised in popular and cultural discussions, few academic works have critically examined it using a combined theoretical lens of visual aesthetics and family emotional systems.

From my point of view, this dual-theoretical approach allows for a more holistic understanding of how character values are constructed not only through explicit dialogue but also through visual cues and emotional interaction. I believe this integrated framework is essential for analyzing *Encanto* as a tool for character education. By connecting *Mise en Scène* with Family Systems Theory, this study offers a new perspective on how animated films reflect and shape children's understanding of moral responsibility, emotional boundaries, and family communication.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method to analyze how the animated film *Encanto* (2021) presents character values and family communication. The research aims to explore the messages conveyed through visual storytelling and emotional dynamics using two theoretical frameworks: *Mise en Scène* theory and Family Systems Theory. There are several stages that I did in this study. The first stage involved selecting the object of analysis. *Encanto* was chosen because it presents strong themes of family, identity, and emotional conflict, which are closely related to character education. The scenes selected for analysis include those that highlight tension, emotional expression, and turning points in character development. The second stage was defining the theoretical frameworks. *Mise en Scène* was used to examine the film's visual elements such as color, lighting, setting, costume, and camera movement that help communicate mood, meaning, and values [21], [22]. Family Systems Theory [18] was applied to explore the emotional patterns and roles within the Madrigal family. Concepts such as emotional distance, pressure, unspoken expectations, and family roles were useful in analyzing how characters interact and how values are passed from one generation to the next. In the third stage, data were collected by watching and rewatching the film closely. The researcher observed key scenes, took notes, and captured screenshots to focus on visual symbols, character expressions, and meaningful dialogue. The analysis focused not only on what the characters say but also on how the environment around them supports or reflects their emotions and values. The fourth stage was analyzing the data. I used content analysis to examine how visual elements and family interactions work together to convey moral messages. For example, the way the magical house begins to crack visually represents the emotional cracks in the family's relationships. The analysis of each scene combined both the visual and emotional elements to better understand how the film teaches values like empathy, honesty, self-acceptance, and communication. Finally, in the fifth stage, I focused on concluding the findings and identifying their relevance to character education.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, I present an in-depth analysis of three central characters from *Encanto* (2021), Luisa, Isabela, and Mirabel to explore how the film illustrates key aspects of character development and family communication. Each character represents a different emotional struggle within the family: Luisa deals with the burden of strength, Isabela faces the pressure of perfection, and Mirabel navigates rejection while becoming the bridge toward healing. Their interactions with Abuela Alma, the family matriarch, further reveal the emotional dynamics and generational expectations that shape the Madrigal household. The analysis draws on visual elements (*Mise en Scène*) and psychological patterns (Family Systems Theory) to interpret how these scenes convey meaningful lessons in resilience, identity, and empathy.

The first analysis is taken in minutes 00:28:50 (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Luisa Holding a Donkey
Source: (Disney, 2021)

In one of the most visually symbolic moments of *Encanto*, Luisa is depicted carrying a donkey. In my observation, this image represents something far deeper: a child burdened with expectations far beyond her emotional capacity. Using *Mise en Scène* theory, I see how the elements of the frame, Luisa's central placement, her muscular build, the exaggerated weight she carries, and her simple, utilitarian costume which visually reinforce her role as the family's physical and emotional anchor. The lighting remains bright, almost cheerful, but this ironically contrasts with the heaviness of her internal struggle. The donkey, usually a symbol of labor, becomes a visual metaphor for the normalized burdens she has learned to carry without protest. As Reeper [21] emphasizes, visual composition and symbolic props can subtly communicate psychological tension and this moment encapsulates that perfectly.

From the perspective of Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978), I interpret Luisa's position in the family as that of the "parentified child", someone who takes on responsibility far too early. Her lyric, "I'm pretty sure I'm worthless if I can't be of service," suggests emotional fusion, where her sense of identity is entirely tied to what she can provide for others. In my view, this reflects how children raised in high-pressure environments may internalize the belief that love must be earned through performance. As Papero [19] and Goldenberg & Goldenberg [20] have pointed out, these family roles often go unchallenged, but they can have long-term effects on a child's emotional development and self-worth.

From an educational standpoint, I believe this moment offers a vital entry point for teaching about boundaries, emotional regulation, and self-compassion. It challenges the common cultural narrative that praises children only when they are helpful or self-sacrificing. In my experience, discussing scenes like this with learners can prompt them to reflect on their own feelings of pressure or perfectionism. Ultimately, this scene doesn't just portray Luisa's personal crisis, but it provides a meaningful space to explore values of balance, self-awareness, and emotional honesty, all of which are essential goals in character education.

The second analysis is taken in minutes 01:03:10–01:05:00, Isabela's Breakthrough—"What Else Can I Do?"



Figure 2. Isabela showing her emotional freedom.

Source: (Disney, 2021)

In Figure 2, I observed that Isabela's breakthrough during the song "What Else Can I Do?" represents one of the most powerful moments of identity liberation in *Encanto*. Throughout the film, Isabela has been presented as the "golden child", graceful, elegant, and burdened with the expectation to always appear perfect. This scene marks a turning point. As she begins to create vibrant, untamed plants instead of her usual symmetrical flowers, the visual world around her erupts into a wild tapestry of colors, movement, and life. In my view, this dramatic change in aesthetic is not just artistic. It is symbolic of her emotional and psychological transformation.

Through the lens of *Mise en Scène*, this moment is packed with deliberate visual storytelling. The color palette shifts dramatically from soft pastels to saturated hues—deep purples, fiery oranges, and electric greens which reflect her transition from suppression to self-expression. The camera movement becomes more dynamic, circling and dancing with her as she explores her new creative abilities. The once-neat garden dissolves into wild terrain, mirroring her internal shift away from control and compliance. According to Reeper [21], *Mise en Scène* elements like color, space, and movement can externalize character emotions and in this case, they perfectly visualize the chaos and beauty of breaking free.

From the standpoint of Family Systems Theory, I interpret Isabela's journey as a clear process of differentiation of self (Bowen, 1978) [18]. For so long, she has conformed to Abuela's image of who she should be—flawless, obedient, and aligned with the family's pride. But in this scene, she questions and finally rejects that role. Her joyful realization, "It's not symmetrical or perfect, but it's beautiful and it's mine" reveals a young woman stepping into her individuality. This rebellion is not selfish; it is an act of emotional maturity. In my view, it takes tremendous character strength to challenge idealized roles assigned within a family and to claim the right to be authentically oneself.

What strikes me most is how this scene communicates the emotional cost of perfectionism, especially in cultures or families where children are expected to uphold reputation and harmony. Isabela's inner conflict resonates with many learners who feel boxed into roles they did not choose. I believe this moment is extremely valuable for character education, as it offers a narrative through which students can explore themes of identity, personal growth, and emotional courage. Educators can use this scene to encourage learners to reflect: What are the roles I've been given? Are they true to who I am? In my perspective, Isabela's breakthrough is more than just a magical moment—it is a pedagogical tool. It reminds us that character education is not about producing "ideal" behavior, but about empowering young people to know themselves, express their values, and build relationships based on honesty rather than performance. By analyzing this scene with students, we can foster discussions on autonomy, emotional intelligence, and the strength it takes to be real in a world that often rewards appearances over authenticity.

The last analysis is taken in minutes 01:20:20 and 01:21:40 (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Mirabel and Abuela face each other by the river

Source: (Disney, 2021)

In this scene (Figure 3), we see Mirabel, the youngest daughter of Julieta and the only Madrigal child without a magical gift, facing her grandmother Abuela Alma, the matriarch of the family. They are at the edge of the river, a significant and symbolic location in Abuela's life story. Years ago, it was near this river that she lost her husband, Pedro, while fleeing violence. It was also the place where the family's miracle began. Now, it becomes a space of emotional honesty and reconciliation between two generations of women.

From my perspective, this moment is emotionally charged and symbolically profound. It is the first time in the film that both characters truly see and listen to each other. Mirabel, who has been blamed for the family's fading miracle, stands with quiet strength. Abuela, who has long carried her grief through control and perfectionism, finally appears vulnerable. They face each other not with anger, but with an unspoken readiness to heal.

Visually, the *Mise en Scène* is minimal but intentional. The river flows gently in the background, the lighting is soft and golden, and both characters are framed equally—neither dominant, neither small. This balance in composition reflects the emotional equality that is finally taking place between them. According to Giannetti [22], spatial arrangement and lighting can symbolize power dynamics, and here, we see those dynamics dissolve. The scene's quiet design supports the power of the spoken words and the emotions behind them.

Through the lens of Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978), I interpret this scene as a critical moment of emotional breakthrough [18]. For most of the film, Abuela has unknowingly projected her trauma and fears onto her children and grandchildren, especially Mirabel. This projection created a rigid family system, where love was tied to achievement. But here, by the river, she acknowledges her past pain and the pressure she put on the family. In my observation, this is not just a moment of confession. It is a restructuring of the emotional system. Mirabel listens with empathy and does not react with resentment. Instead, she becomes the bridge between the old hurt and the future healing.

In my view, this is one of the most powerful and instructive moments in the entire film. It demonstrates how intergenerational pain can be softened through humility, emotional honesty, and compassionate listening. From an educational standpoint, I believe this scene can serve as an invaluable model for character education—highlighting values such as forgiveness, empathy, accountability, and transformation. It reminds us that children are not only shaped by family expectations but also capable of reshaping the family narrative itself. This moment does not offer a magical solution but a very human one: when we stop defending ourselves and begin to understand one another, healing begins. For teachers, parents, and learners, the river becomes more than a backdrop—but a living metaphor for change, flow, and the quiet strength of emotional truth.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, *Encanto* (2021) offers more than just a magical narrative; it presents a thoughtful portrayal of emotional struggles within a family system. Through my analysis of Luisa, Isabela, and Mirabel, it becomes clear that each character represents different aspects of identity formation, pressure, and the need for emotional recognition. Their interactions with Abuela Alma, as the source and guardian of tradition, highlight how generational expectations and silence can impact character development. Therefore, by applying *Mise en Scène* and Family Systems Theory, I found that the film powerfully communicates values essential to character education, such as empathy, authenticity, resilience, and open communication. Thus, the film can be seen as a valuable resource for educators and parents seeking to support the emotional growth of children and adolescents. Ultimately, from my perspective, *Encanto* serves not only as entertainment but as an engaging educational medium that encourages reflection, healing, and stronger family connections.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Grace Amialia Anfetonanda Neolaka, my supervisor at President University, for her continuous guidance, insightful feedback, and encouragement throughout the development of this research. Her academic support and mentorship have been invaluable in strengthening both the theoretical and analytical aspects of this study. I also extend my appreciation to President University, my academic home, for providing a supportive learning environment and the facilities that enabled this research to be completed successfully. Finally, I would like to thank JUPE: Jurnal Pendidikan Mandala for the opportunity to submit and share this work within its academic community.

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