E-ISSN: 3025-0994
Halaman 7015-7023
Volume 4 Nomor 3 Tahun 2026

The Role of Judy Hopps in Nick Wilde's Character Development in Zootopia (2016)

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Abstract

Background/Objective: Character development in animated films can communicate moral values through changes in personality, attitude, and social behavior. Zootopia (2016) portrays Nick Wilde as a cynical and self-interested fox whose worldview is shaped by childhood discrimination and persistent social stereotypes. Although earlier studies have discussed prejudice and discrimination in the film, the interpersonal process that drives Nick's transformation has received limited attention. This study therefore examines the role of Judy Hopps in developing Nick Wilde from an egoistic character into a sympathetic one. Method: This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using Abrams' characterization theory and Forster's concept of round characters. Data were obtained through repeated viewing of the film, transcription of relevant dialogue, identification of actions and interactions, and classification of scenes that demonstrate changes in Nick's characterization. The data were analyzed through reduction, display, and conclusion drawing based on the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. Findings: The results show that Judy functions as a trust provider, stereotype challenger, moral model, vulnerable partner, and reinforcer of positive identity. Her consistent acceptance, emotional openness, and confidence in Nick gradually weaken his defensive cynicism and encourage cooperation, empathy, loyalty, and responsibility. Nick's transformation is evident in changes in his speech, actions, beliefs, relationships, and social identity. Conclusion: Judy is the principal external catalyst of Nick's development. Their relationship illustrates that trust, acceptance, and empathetic interaction can challenge internalized prejudice and support meaningful personal growth.

Keywords: Character Development, Judy Hopps, Nick Wilde, Zootopia, Egoistic To Sympathetic

INTRODUCTION

Film is a powerful narrative medium that shapes audiences' understanding of morality through character arcs (Bordwell & Thompson, 2023). Among the intrinsic elements of film, character and its development are central to conveying ideological and moral messages (Saputra & Loisa, 2021). In Zootopia (2016), produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios, the character Nick Wilde undergoes a striking transformation from a self-centered con artist to a cooperative police officer a change that has been widely noted but rarely analyzed in terms of its primary driving force. Central to this arc is Judy Hopps, the first rabbit police officer in the city of Zootopia, whose consistent interactions with Nick serve as the essential catalyst for his moral evolution.

A character is a person represented in a narrative or dramatic work who is interpreted by the audience as possessing certain moral, emotional, and psychological qualities (Abrams & Harpham, 1999). These

qualities are revealed through speech, actions, appearance, and interactions with other characters. The method by which an author or filmmaker constructs a character is termed characterization. Character development, in turn, refers to the significant changes in a character's personality, attitude, or worldview across the narrative arc, often serving as the vehicle for a film's thematic message (Hasanah et al., 2018; Ermina et al., 2023).

Several previous studies have explored Zootopia (2016) through the lens of stereotype and discrimination (Atillah et al., 2020; Yahya & Hikmat, 2024). Batubara et al. (2020) deconstructed the leading characters but focused on deconstruction rather than developmental dynamics. Studies employing Abrams' (1999) characterization theory and Forster's (1927) round character concept have been applied to character analysis (Syahidah & Laksono, 2021), yet these studies generally treat characters in isolation. Campbell (2012) highlighted the 'mentor' archetype in hero journeys, while Eder (2010) emphasized that character change is often externally triggered. Nevertheless, the specific dyadic mechanism by which one character's consistent behavior engineers another's moral transformation remains underexplored in animated film studies.

The novelty of this research lies in treating Judy Hopps not merely as a co-protagonist but as an active agent of change, systematically analyzing her dialogic and behavioral strategies that dismantle Nick's egoism. Drawing on Abrams' (1999) characterization theory and Forster's (1927) concept of round characters, this study proposes that consistent positive interaction marked by trust, vulnerability, and moral modeling functions as the primary external stimulus challenging a character's internalized negative schemas. Accordingly, the central research question is: How does Judy Hopps contribute to Nick Wilde's character development from egoistic to sympathetic in Zootopia (2016)?

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method with a literary approach. According to Sugiyono (2017), qualitative research studies natural phenomena with the researcher as the key instrument and produces descriptive data. The approach interprets textual and visual data from the film to understand the dynamics of character development and interpersonal influence.

Data Source and Sample

The primary data source is the animated film Zootopia (2016). The analytical sample consists of all scenes involving direct interactions between Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde, purposively selected to capture the full developmental arc of the latter's character. The unit of analysis is dialogue and action sequences. Secondary data were drawn from books, journals, and academic sources related to character theory, characterization, and character development.

Operational Definitions

Role of Judy Hopps: Operationalized as her verbal and non-verbal actions that challenge, support, or influence Nick's personality and worldview. Observable indicators include expressions of trust, collaborative invitations, emotional self-disclosure, and moral stances taken in interaction with Nick.

Nick Wilde's Character Development: Measured through shifts in characterization traits from egoistic (self-centered, cynical, manipulative) to sympathetic (cooperative, loyal, empathetic), categorized along Abrams' (1999) dimensions of speech, action, and interaction.

Data Collection Technique

Data were collected through three systematic steps: (1) repeated viewing of Zootopia (2016) to comprehensively understand the storyline and the characters' behavioral dynamics; (2) identification and transcription of Nick Wilde's dialogues, actions, and scenes reflecting his egoistic and sympathetic characteristics, with particular attention to scenes where Judy's influence is evident; and (3) classification of the collected data according to stages of character development and the factors that precipitate change.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (2014), comprising three stages: (1) Data Reduction selecting and focusing on scenes and dialogues relevant to Nick's character development in relation to Judy's role; (2) Data Display presenting the filtered data in narrative and tabular formats to facilitate systematic analysis; and (3) Conclusion Drawing deriving conclusions from the analyzed data, linked to characterization theory (Abrams, 1999) and the round character concept (Forster, 1927), to answer the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nick Wilde's Initial Characterization: The Egoistic Phase

Based on Abrams' (1999) theory of characterization which holds that a character's personality is revealed through speech, actions, thoughts, and interactions Nick Wilde is initially constructed as a complex yet fundamentally egoistic individual. His defining characteristics in the first act of Zootopia encompass cunning intelligence, deep cynicism, pervasive skepticism, and emotional guardedness, all of which are rooted in a formative childhood trauma.

Nick Wilde as a Cunning and Egoistic Character

Nick's intelligence is most prominently displayed through the Pawpsicle scheme, in which he manipulates Judy Hopps into paying for a large popsicle by feigning poverty and emotional distress. His response upon being confronted

"It's called a hustle, sweetheart."

reveals not only his cleverness but his normalization of deception as a life strategy. According to Abrams (1999), characterization through action is among the most direct indicators of personality. Nick's scheme demonstrates strategic thinking, an understanding of social cues, and the ability to manufacture empathy in others all employed exclusively for self-benefit. This egoism, however, is not presented as innate malice. It functions, as Hurlock (1974) notes in psychological literature, as a self-centered behavioral mode arising from social pressure and repeated disappointment.

Nick Wilde as a Cynical and Skeptical Character

Nick's cynicism is most starkly articulated in his confrontation with Judy following the exposure of his scheme:

"Everyone comes to Zootopia thinking they can be anything they want. Well, you can't. You can only be what you are."

This statement encapsulates his internalized defeat. Unlike Judy, who embodies Zootopia's promise of meritocracy, Nick has personalized the city's failure to uphold that promise. His skepticism is equally present in his dismissal of Judy's professional aspirations:

"You'll never be a real cop. You're a cute meter maid though."

Abrams (1999) identifies dialogue as a primary vehicle of characterization. Through these utterances, the film positions Nick as a character whose worldview has been narrowed by systemic rejection, a finding consistent with Eder's (2010) observation that character cynicism frequently correlates with sustained negative social experience.

The Psychological Root: Childhood Trauma and Emotional Guardedness

The psychological architecture of Nick's egoism is illuminated through his childhood flashback narration:

"I learned two things that day. One, I was never gonna let anyone see that they got to me."

As a young fox, Nick aspired to join the Junior Ranger Scouts a community organization that symbolized acceptance and belonging. Instead, he was humiliated and bullied by other young animals solely because of his species. This traumatic rejection became the pivotal moment that redefined his relational schema. His subsequent statement,

"If the world's only gonna see a fox as shifty and untrustworthy, there's no point in trying to be anything else."

demonstrates the internalization of societal stereotypes as a coping mechanism what Syahidah and Laksono (2021) describe as an ego defense mechanism that protects against

anticipated future rejection. Table 1 below synthesizes Nick's initial characterization across Abrams' analytical dimensions.

Table 1. Initial Characterization of Nick Wilde (Egoistic Phase)

Trait	Evidence (Scene / Dialogue)	Abrams' Dimension	Developmental Implication
Cunning / Egoistic	"*It's called a hustle, sweetheart*." (Pawpsicle scam, manipulating Judy)	Action	Establishes Nick's strategic self-interest as a survival mode
Cynical	*"Everyone comes to Zootopia thinking they can be anything they want. Well, you can't. You can only be what you are."*	Dialogue	Reveals internalized defeat; Nick denies possibility of change
Skeptical	*"You'll never be a real cop. You're a cute meter maid though."*	Dialogue / Interaction	Projects personal experience of rejection onto Judy
Emotionally Guarded	*"I learned two things that day. One, I was never gonna let anyone see that they got to me." (childhood flashback)*	Dialogue (past trauma)	Root cause of egoism: trauma-driven emotional suppression
Resignation	*"If the world's only gonna see a fox as shifty and untrustworthy, there's no point in trying to be anything else."*	Dialogue	Reflects self-fulfilling acceptance of societal stereotypes

Judy Hopps' Role as the Primary Catalyst of Development

The central argument of this study is that Nick's character development is not a solitary internal process but is actively mediated by Judy Hopps' sustained positive regard. The following analysis traces five distinct roles that Judy performs, each corresponding to a measurable stage in Nick's psychological evolution. Table 2 presents a systematic overview of these roles and their effects.

Table 2. Judy Hopps' Roles and Their Impact on Nick Wilde's Development

Judy's Role	Representative Scene / Action	Immediate Effect on Nick	Developmental Stage	Abrams' Dimension
Trust Provider	Shares police investigation app; says "I need your help." despite knowing about his scam	Surprise and first genuine engagement; agrees to cooperate	Skepticism Reduction	Interaction
Stereotype Challenger	"You are so much more than that." places a paw on Nick's arm after hearing his traumatic childhood story	Emotional unguarding; Nick shares his past openly for the first time	Emotional Unguarding	Action / Dialogue

Moral Model	Refuses to abandon the missing mammals case despite institutional ridicule and personal danger	Nick begins assisting without personal financial gain	Value Internalization	Action
Vulnerable Partner	Breaks down and apologizes at the press conference, admitting she hurt Nick with her prejudiced remarks	Nick moves from anger toward empathy; returns to reconcile and help	Empathetic Bonding	Action / Dialogue
Reinforcer of Identity	Publicly acknowledges Nick as her partner and closest friend at the conclusion of the film	Nick joins the ZPD; accepts a positive social identity	Transformation Complete	Interaction

Trust Provider: Initiating Skepticism Reduction

The first and most fundamental shift in Nick's trajectory occurs when Judy invites his collaboration despite full knowledge of his deceptive history. By sharing her police investigation application and stating 'I need your help,' Judy enacts what Eder (2010) terms an 'unexpected positive response' a social event that disrupts a character's established assumptions. For Nick, who has navigated a world in which his intelligence was feared and exploited, being recognized as useful rather than dangerous constitutes a profound relational novelty. This moment initiates the first stage of his development: skepticism reduction.

Stereotype Challenger: Triggering Emotional Unguarding

The most emotionally decisive scene in Nick's developmental arc occurs when, after he shares his childhood trauma, Judy places a paw on his arm and says:

"You are so much more than that."

This action and utterance operate simultaneously on Abrams' dimensions of action and dialogue to constitute what might be termed a 'corrective emotional experience.' Nick has spent his adult life governed by the belief that society perceives him solely through the lens of species stereotype. Judy's gesture both physical and verbal directly contradicts this belief. The immediate effect is Nick's emotional unguarding: for the first time in the narrative, he discloses his past voluntarily and without strategic calculation. This transition corresponds to the second stage of development emotional unguarding and aligns with Forster's (1927) conception of a round character being capable of surprising change 'in a convincing way.'

Moral Model: Facilitating Value Internalization

Judy's refusal to abandon the missing mammals investigation, even when faced with institutional ridicule and physical danger, provides Nick with a sustained model of moral behavior that does not depend on reward or social approval. Initially, Nick assists her for transactional reasons (legal compulsion under the blackmail agreement). However, as the investigation progresses and Judy's moral commitment becomes apparent, Nick begins assisting without any material incentive. This shift from externally motivated behavior to internally motivated cooperation marks the third stage of development: value internalization. Campbell's (2012) monomythic framework is instructive here: Judy functions as both 'mentor' and 'ally,' but the dynamic is distinctly reciprocal her moral consistency provides the standard against which Nick begins to measure his own conduct.

Vulnerable Partner: Catalyzing Empathetic Bonding

A critical turning point follows Judy's prejudiced remarks at the press conference, where she inadvertently characterizes predators in stereotypical terms, causing Nick to feel betrayed. Rather than retreating into defensiveness, Judy later seeks out Nick, breaks down, and apologizes sincerely acknowledging her own complicity in the very prejudice she claimed to oppose. This act of vulnerability reverses the relational dynamic: Nick, who has spent the entire film resisting emotional exposure, is now confronted with a significant other who needs

his empathy rather than the reverse. His decision to return, reconcile, and collaborate represents a fourth developmental stage: empathetic bonding, in which Nick's sympathetic orientation is no longer merely reactive to Judy's kindness but is actively extended toward her.

Reinforcer of Identity: Completing the Transformation

The culmination of Judy's influence occurs at the film's close, when she publicly acknowledges Nick as her partner and closest friend, inviting him to join the Zootopia Police Department. This act of public endorsement provides Nick with a new social identity not the 'sly fox' of societal stereotype, but a trusted law enforcement officer. Nick's acceptance of this identity and his decision to join the ZPD symbolizes the complete restructuring of his self-concept. As Abrams (1999) argues, characterization operates through interaction, and this final interactive moment crystallizes the entirety of Nick's developmental journey.

Nick Wilde's Transformation: From Egoistic to Sympathetic

The comparative analysis of Nick's characterization before and after Judy's influence (Table 3) reveals a comprehensive moral restructuring across all five of Abrams' characterization dimensions: speech, action, belief, interaction, and identity. This transformation fulfills Forster's (1927) criteria for a round character one who undergoes substantial psychological and emotional development, whose change is convincing, and whose complexity distinguishes them from flat, static characters.

Table 3. Comparative Overview of Nick Wilde's Character: Before and After Judy's Influence

Character Dimension(Abrams, 1999)	Egoistic Phase (Before Judy's Influence)	Sympathetic Phase (After Judy's Influence)
Speech	Sarcastic, dismissive, self-protective (e.g., "Sly fox. Dumb bunny.")	Cooperative, honest, supportive (e.g., willingness to testify; encourages Judy)
Action	Deceptive schemes (Pawpsicle scam); avoids emotional attachment	Assists investigation without reward; risks personal safety for collective good

Character Dimension(Abrams, 1999)	Egoistic Phase (Before Judy's Influence)	Sympathetic Phase (After Judy's Influence)
Thought / Belief	Cynical worldview: "You can only be what you are." Social mobility is impossible	Believes in justice and personal agency; internalizes value of trust and cooperation
Interaction	Transactional relationships; uses others for personal gain	Genuine partnership; loyal friendship with Judy; advocacy for the vulnerable
Identity	Accepts the stereotype of the "sly fox"; no ambition beyond survival	Joins the Zootopia Police Department; redefines identity through service and responsibility

At the beginning of the narrative, Nick's speech is sarcastic and dismissive; by the film's close, it is cooperative and supportive. His actions shift from deceptive self-enrichment to altruistic risk-taking. His beliefs evolve from fatalistic resignation to a functional faith in justice and human or animal agency. His relational mode transforms from transactional exploitation to genuine loyalty. And his identity shifts from the self-fulfilling performance of the 'sly fox' stereotype to the earned role of police officer and partner.

Crucially, this transformation is not the product of self-reflection alone. Each stage of Nick's development is directly precipitated by a specific action or quality of Judy Hopps (see Table 2). Nick's change does not occur in the absence of Judy; it occurs precisely because of her. This finding supports the research proposition that consistent positive interaction marked by trust, vulnerability, and moral modeling functions as the primary external stimulus that dismantles a character's internalized negative schema, extending the theoretical frameworks of both Abrams (1999) and Eder (2010) to the specific context of dyadic character development in animated film.

Discussion: Theoretical and Comparative Implications

The findings of this study both confirm and extend existing scholarly work on Zootopia. Atillah et al. (2020) and Yahya and Hikmat (2024) demonstrate that the film engages systematically with the social mechanics of stereotype and discrimination. This study narrows the analytical lens to the interpersonal antidote: how one character's sustained refusal to perpetuate prejudice dismantles another character's internalized acceptance of it. Unlike Batubara et al. (2020), who deconstruct Nick's character without centering Judy's agency, this research establishes her as indispensable to his transformation.

The study also advances the application of Abrams' (1999) characterization theory and Forster's (1927) round character concept by adding a mechanism: 'trust-driven ego dissolution.' Nick's egoism is not overcome by narrative circumstance alone but by the specific, cumulative quality of Judy's engagement. This aligns with Eder's (2010) broader argument that character change is externally triggered and with Campbell's (2012) monomythic recognition of the mentor-ally archetype, while adding the specific dyadic and reciprocal dimension missing from those frameworks.

Furthermore, the film's didactic message that prejudice can be overcome through trust, acceptance, and empathetic relationship gains significant depth when analyzed through this lens. Nick's transformation illustrates that social prejudice shapes behavior without permanently determining identity, and that corrective emotional experiences within authentic relationships constitute a meaningful pathway to moral growth.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Judy Hopps is the central catalyst in Nick Wilde's character development from an egoistic, cynical fox to a sympathetic, socially responsible

individual in Zootopia (2016). Her five interlocking roles trust provider, stereotype challenger, moral model, vulnerable partner, and reinforcer of positive identity collectively and sequentially dismantle Nick's defense mechanisms, which were built in response to childhood discrimination and sustained social rejection. Through her consistent positive regard, collaborative invitation, and courageous self-disclosure, Judy enables Nick to reinterpret societal expectations and to embrace cooperation, loyalty, and responsibility over self-interest. This transformation is clearly evidenced through the dialogic and behavioral shifts mapped across Abrams' (1999) characterization dimensions, confirming Nick's status as a round character in Forster's (1927) sense.

The research concludes that character development in Zootopia is not a solitary internal process but is heavily mediated by a significant other who models empathy and refuses to perpetuate prejudice. Nick Wilde's arc powerfully illustrates how one individual's unwavering belief in another can rewrite internalized negative narratives, offering an educationally rich message about the transformative potential of acceptance. Future research could employ a comparative approach examining similar mentor-protégé dynamics in other Disney animated films, or incorporate psychological frameworks such as attachment theory or cognitive schema theory to deepen the analysis of fictional character transformation. Cinematographic analysis and reception studies could further illuminate how Judy's role is encoded visually and received by diverse audiences.

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