

# Utilizing children's literature in character education: A case study of Şermin Yaşar<sup>#</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The child who is introduced to literature at an early age is considered to have a significant advantage both academically and developmentally. From this perspective, the positive impact of literature on children is an undeniable reality. In books written for children, the manner in which characters are presented is of considerable importance. For this reason, and because there has been no research focusing on the character education aspects of Şermin Yaşar's books for children, this study examines the characters found in her children's literature. The research seeks to answer the question, "How are the characters in Şermin Yaşar's books for children constructed?" Utilizing a qualitative research tradition, the study employed a document analysis design. During the data collection process, a literature review was conducted to identify the essential characteristics that should be present in children's books and the concept of character. Subsequently, the books in question were acquired in print format and read twice by the researcher, who then coded them. The data obtained in the study were initially subjected to descriptive analysis, followed by content analysis. The findings indicate that the characters in Şermin Yaşar's children's books are constructed in a manner that aligns with real life. Furthermore, it was determined that the characters are generally not idealized, thereby possessing qualities with which child readers can identify. This choice enables young readers to find pieces of themselves in the books and encounter characters designed in a way that is consistent with children's realities. It has been observed that this situation positively influences the character education of child readers.

**Keywords:** Children's literature, children's books, Şermin Yaşar, idealized character.

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## INTRODUCTION

Children's literature fulfills its purpose through well-prepared, quality books designed for the target audience. Books written for children are expected to provide enjoyment and education, foster imagination, and contribute to language skills (Temizyürek, 2014). A quality children's book is a cohesive entity in terms of form, content, language, and expression; any deficiency in one aspect affects the overall impact (Yılmaz, 2016a). From this perspective, certain features should be present in a well-crafted children's book, typically categorized under form, content, language, and expression. The form includes illustrations, size, binding, font, cover, paper

quality, and page layout, while content encompasses themes, messages, and characters.

The concept of character within content features is a significant focus. Defined as the person whose emotions, thoughts, actions, and passions are depicted in literary works (Püsküllüoğlu, 1994), characters are essential elements in literature. According to Karataş (2014), characters form the core structure of a fictional narrative, inviting readers to engage in the world of the story by identifying with or opposing them. Through this connection, readers become part of the narrative, aligning with the conditional agreement between the author, text,

and reader. Although the reader understands that the characters exist within an imagined realm, they still form a bond with them.

Yılmaz and Kılıç (2015) argue that characters are a fundamental component of literary children's books. Ideally, these characters, who subtly convey values of goodness and truth, should not be idealized. Instead, they should be relatable figures that children could encounter in everyday life. Perfect, flawless characters often seem distant and difficult for children to identify with; children tend to relate more easily to flawed, occasionally clumsy characters who are easier to empathize with (Ural, 2013). Characters in children's books not only cultivate a taste for literature but also deliver messages that contribute to the child's character development (Yılmaz, 2016b).

Characters in literature can be categorized into four main types. Open characters are those about whom the author provides extensive information, often as the main characters carrying the message. Closed characters play secondary roles. Those who undergo changes within the story are known as dynamic characters, while those who remain unchanged are static characters (Sever, 2010). According to Karataş (2014), authors often use characters as spokespersons to deliver messages to children. Historically, this approach led to didactic and idealized characters, presenting a limited, artificial image that children found unrelatable. Characters in children's literature thus became idealized figures that children might find dull or difficult to identify with.

Books for children hold great potential for character education. Character education plays a crucial role in children's learning by providing social and moral lessons. Thus, children's literature can effectively serve as a tool for instilling character education (Tyra, 2012). According to Cain, children's literature has a profound influence on children's character and empathy.

Numerous studies have explored the connection between children's books and character education. Yıldız (2024) analyzed character education elements in primary school textbooks. Korkmaz and Akpınar (2019) examined a children's novel in terms of character education and identified characteristics like patriotism, determination, faith, selflessness, and heroism, noting that these traits positively impacted children's character development. Özbaşı (2020) studied Vladimir Tumanov's novels from a character education perspective, highlighting that the child characters in these novels predominantly possess positive personality traits. Turan (2014) found that preschool books often emphasize values such as curiosity, kindness, and happiness, while values like achievement, respect, leadership, and environmental consciousness appear less frequently. Işık's 2017 study on Mevlana İdris Zengin's works found that most characters possess positive traits, which children can relate to. Doğanemur's 2019 research on Aytül Akal's novels showed that these works offer rich examples of value transmission.

Beyond these studies on character education, there has

been research on different aspects of Şermin Yaşar's works. Başar (2021) examined her works from the perspective of children's literature and education, noting that her characters often focus on family relationships. Dağ (2021), who analyzed her works regarding educational messages, found that curiosity was the most common theme, followed by imagination and reasoning. Düz's 2023 study highlighted the role of Yaşar's books in values education, while Akgün (2024) observed that her works are rich in sensitivity training. Tosun (2024) examined conflict resolution in Yaşar's works and found that they provide positive examples for children. Bursa (2024) identified elements of folk culture in her books, which facilitate cultural transmission. Gencer and Doğan Kahtalı (2022) concluded that her works are valuable in terms of character education.

Despite extensive literature on the relationship between children's literature and character education, no study has specifically focused on character education in Şermin Yaşar's books for children. This study aims to examine the characters in Yaşar's children's books from the perspective of character education, addressing the question, "How are the characters in Şermin Yaşar's works for children portrayed?" The study also addresses the following sub-questions:

1. Are the characters in Şermin Yaşar's children's literature idealized?
2. Are the characters in her children's books relatable for young readers?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research design

The study employs the document analysis design, as the works to be analyzed serve as the primary data source. According to Yıldırım and Şimşek (2016), document analysis involves the examination of written materials that contain information about the phenomenon or phenomena to be investigated. Since the study focuses on the characters in Şermin Yaşar's works of children's literature, the document analysis design has been chosen. Document analysis is considered more practical compared to other research methods due to its time efficiency, lower cost, and ability to facilitate detailed examination (Bowen, 2009).

### Documents examined

The study employs a purposive sampling method. According to Patton (2014), purposive sampling emphasizes in-depth understanding. In this context, 16 books by Şermin Yaşar were initially obtained to determine which works would be examined. Of these, 5 books were

excluded from the study as they were not written for children. Additionally, 6 of the obtained books were excluded because they were intended for the preschool age group. Subsequently, expert opinions were sought regarding these works. Furthermore, insights were also

gathered from a Turkish language teacher currently working at a middle school. In this study, 5 works written by Şermin Yaşar for middle school-aged children were analyzed. Information regarding the analyzed documents is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Documents examined.

Title	Publisher	Publication year	Abbreviation
Abartma Tozu	Taze Kitap	2019	AT
Babaannem Geri Döndü	Taze Kitap	2021	BGD
Cingo	Doğan Egmont	2021	CN
Dedemin Bakkalı	Taze kitap	2016	DB
Oh Ne Âlâ Memleket	Doğan Egmont	2021	ONAM

### Data collection

In the data collection process, a literature review was first conducted on the characteristics that should be present in children's books and the concept of character. Subsequently, the works under study were obtained in printed form through online platforms. The acquired works were read and coded twice by the researcher. Initially, the researcher read the works without making any notes or recordings. Afterward, a qualitative research expert read one of the works under examination. Once agreement between the codes applied by the researcher and the qualitative research expert was achieved, the books were reread by the researcher, keeping the objectives of the study in mind, and then indexed accordingly.

### Data analysis

Following the indexing process, the obtained data were initially subjected to descriptive analysis. This approach was chosen in order to summarize and interpret the data according to previously defined themes. Additionally, as the goal was to present the findings in an organized and interpreted manner to the reader (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2016), descriptive analysis was employed. Within this framework, elements related to character education were treated as a theme in the works under study. Subsequently, the data collected around the identified theme were subjected to content analysis. Content analysis involves extracting the fundamental consistencies and meanings from large qualitative datasets, aimed at reducing and interpreting qualitative data (Patton, 2014). In this context, the data evaluated through content analysis were grouped under new categories. These categories include idealized characters, child character traits, and adult character traits. In determining these categories, similar studies were also consulted.

Throughout these procedures, measures were taken to ensure coding reliability. To achieve this, the coding

process was checked using Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula for reliability: Reliability = Agreement / (Agreement + Disagreement). According to this formula, for the coding to be considered reliable, the result must be .70 or higher. The calculation based on this formula yielded a coding consistency of .84, indicating that the coding in the study was reliable. Additionally, abbreviations were used in the study to facilitate referencing the works under investigation. Along with the abbreviations in parentheses, the page numbers from which the quotations were taken are also provided.

### FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

In this section, the characters in Şermin Yaşar's works for children are analyzed.

*Abartma Tozu* is a book consisting of 26 chapters and 159 pages. Each chapter presents the author's critical perspective on people's reactions to various situations. The book also addresses language issues that have arisen over time and persist today. It depicts the exaggerated lifestyles of the residents of Buğdaylı, which eventually spiral out of control. Inspector Tevfik Kılırkıryarar intervenes, helping everyone return to their previous way of life.

The main character's speech patterns are written in a way that mirrors everyday interactions, making the character relatable. For instance, *Bobannieeeee!* diye bağırdım. Aslında babaanne demek istiyordum ama onu görünce heyecanlanıyorum ve sesim "Bobannieeeee!" diye çıkıyor." (AT, 15). "Velamcaaaa, Velamcaaa!" Aslında "Veli amca" diyordum ama sesim öyle çıkıyordu." (AT, 47). "Feymabiii, Feymaabiii!" diye bağırdım." "Aslında Fehmi abi diyordum ama sesim "Feymabiii" diye çıkıyordu." (AT, 68) and similar terms throughout the book make the main character more entertaining and accessible, allowing young readers to connect with these expressions as part of their own daily experiences.

The book includes numerous characters, with certain

names creatively crafted to capture interest. For example, the main character's cousin, Birsen Başar, aims to excel in every area, while Fikriye Gıcır, the protagonist's aunt, is portrayed as a "cleanliness fanatic." Another character, Inspector Tevfik Kılırkıyarak, is assigned to investigate changes in the town, while Seval Çokal is characterized by her constant shopping habit: "*Benim adım ne? Seval! Ne seversem onu alıyorum.*" (AT, 52). This approach to naming enhances the book's appeal to children.

The main character is shown to have some flaws, like a gluten allergy that prevents him from eating wheat-based foods "*Benim glüten alerjim var. O yüzden yulaf, buğday, unlu mamül, ekmek falan yiyemem.*" (AT, 12). Similar realistic imperfections extend to supporting characters. "*Babannem oda fiyatlarını her ay artırdı. Gelen müşteriler başka kalacak yer olmadığı için mecburen konakladılar. Fiyatları eleştiren müşterilerini kovdu.*" (AT, 21). The book portrays these as evolving characters, designed to be relatable and believable for young readers.

*Babaannem Geri Döndü* recounts the unexpected adventure of Hasibe Hesapoğlu, a loving grandmother who moves into her children's home and teaches them a meaningful lesson. She reminds her son and daughter-in-law, Yusuf and Ayşe, of their childhoods, leading them to be more understanding toward their children. The book's central character often describes life's tedium in a relatable way: "I'd love to say my days are amazing, but they're not. My days are unbearably boring" (BGD, 7). Readers find familiarity in these everyday complaints, fostering a connection between the young audience and the character.

The main character also learns from mistakes, which allows young readers to empathize. "*Size günlerim harika geçiyor, demek isterdim ama öyle bir şey yok. Günlerim aşırı derecede sıkıcı geçiyor.*" (BGD, 7). "*Sıkıntının okulda bana yaptırdığı şeyler şunlar: Kitabımın kenarlarını karalamak. Sıramın üzerine resim yapmak. Pantolonumun üzerini çizmek. Ellerimi kollarımı boyamak...*" (BGD, 8). Additionally, some morals are conveyed through the main character's direct statements, such as "*İnsanlar hakkında konuşmayı sevmem. Bunu doğru bulmuyorum. O yüzden annem ve babam hakkında çok konuşmayacağım.*" (BGD, 14).

In the book, dynamic qualities are attributed to both parents, who realize and correct their mistakes. Initially strict and demanding, the parents eventually acknowledge their errors and embrace their child's perspective: "*Artık kimse sen niye böylesin diye sormuyor. Onlar sormayınca ben de ben niye böyleyim diye kendime sormuyorum. İkisi de sık sık "Çocuksun, çocukluk böyle şeylerle güzel!" diyor.*" (BGD, 160). This evolution provides relatable role models for young readers, as does the transformation of the main character, who learns to enjoy being a child by the end of the story.

In *Cingo*, the Gocukoğlu family adopts a dog named Cingo, and the story unfolds through the dog's perspective, portraying various family events. Cingo,

initially untrained, transforms after receiving education, illustrating the impact of learning on individuals. Each character offers a unique perspective, helping young readers appreciate diverse reactions to situations.

*Dedemin Bakkalı* depicts the experiences of Şebnem, an 8-year-old who decides to work at her grandfather's grocery store. The main character evaluates the occupations of those around her to determine a suitable career. "*Etrafımdaki yetişkinleri izlemeye başladım. Yaptıkları iş, sıkıcılık durumları, işlerini sevip sevmedikleri, kazandıkları para bana fikir verecekti. Bir liste hazırladım.*" (DB, 13). This method of career exploration, alongside realistic portrayals of various professions, allows children to engage thoughtfully with diverse career options.

The book offers advice through the main character's notes in her diary, rather than directly, making the guidance feel more personal and accessible: "*Yetişkinlerin çocuklara yaptıkları haksızlıkları, hataları görebilirsin. Yine de yüzlerine vurma. İnanmazlar. Çocuksun, görmezden gel. Bırak kendilerini dünyanın en zeki insanı sansınlar...*" (DB, 21). The character's curiosity and entrepreneurial spirit also shine through as she experiments with ideas and activities, providing valuable lessons in resourcefulness.

*Oh, Ne Âlâ Memleket* follows four friends—Elif, Kerem, Emre, and Reco—who form a group called EKER, to abolish school. However, after enacting their ideas during National Children's Day, they realize the importance of school and come to appreciate it, illustrating a dynamic shift in character development. "*Haftada beeeeeeeeeşşşş gün kalk ve okula git. Bu bir işkence! Bu bir eziyet! Bu bir çile! Bizim bu çileden kurtulmamız lazım...*" (ONAM, 12).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The forms of address used by the main character in the book are crafted in a manner that reflects expressions commonly encountered in everyday life. The use of this informal style enhances the character's appeal, making them more engaging and fun. It is anticipated that considering children may use similar expressions in their daily lives, this will help them establish a positive connection with the character. In line with this, studies by Işık (2017), Doğanemur (2019), and Başar (2021) have found that when characters in children's books contain elements from the child's own life and surroundings, it aids in the development of positive character traits. In this context, the findings of this study, which indicate that the child characters in Şermin Yaşar's books are designed in a way that children can easily relate to in their daily lives, align with the literature.

Additionally, the creative design of character names in these books positively influences children's attitudes toward the stories. In some cases, this even transforms possible negative perceptions about the books into favorable ones. The presence of minor imperfections in characters is also seen as beneficial, as long as it is not

overdone. Idealized, flawless characters can lead to self-esteem issues for children, who may feel inadequate by comparison. Characters with imperfections provide a realistic model, helping children recognize, accept, and work on their shortcomings.

Dynamic characters, who undergo change throughout the narrative, play an essential role in imparting desirable behaviors to children. Young readers witness these characters recognizing and correcting mistakes within the storyline, making the intended message more memorable. While the characters in the books examined for this study are found to be beneficial in this regard, there are rare instances where messages are directly conveyed through the protagonist, which may reduce the child's interest in the book.

The portrayal of characters as entrepreneurial and curious in the works can trigger the emergence of the child's entrepreneurial spirit. In this way, the child can go through various experiences and learn from the positive or negative outcomes of these experiences. This is particularly important for the child's development of maturity during the transition to adulthood. Similarly, studies by Korkmaz and Akpınar (2019), Özbaşı (2020), Turan (2019), and Dağ (2021) on Şermin Yaşar's children's books have found that the child characters in her works are designed with an entrepreneurial and curious nature. This study also reached similar conclusions, demonstrating that the results of the current research align with the existing literature.

The portrayal of events from the perspectives of different characters in the book Cingo is seen as a positive aspect, as it encourages children to view the events around them from multiple viewpoints. It is believed that this approach helps the child develop a broader perspective on the situations they encounter. In a study conducted by Tosun (2024), conflict resolution strategies in Şermin Yaşar's works were examined. Tosun (2024) found that the ways in which characters resolve conflicts vary across her books. The results of this study align with Tosun's (2024) findings, confirming the consistency between the study's conclusions and the existing literature.

In conclusion, an analysis of the characters in Şermin Yaşar's works indicates that they are crafted realistically. These characters are generally not idealized, making it easier for young readers to identify with them. This approach allows children to find pieces of themselves within the stories, engaging with characters designed to reflect authentic childhood experiences. Consequently, the characters positively contribute to the character education of young readers.

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