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Struggle against Prejudice in Phil Johnston's Screenplay *Wreck-It Ralph*

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how a character confronted with prejudice strives to reach his objectives. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the study focuses on the main character of *Wreck-It Ralph*, a screenplay written by Phil Johnston. The analysis shows that the character's struggle can be classified into two types, namely voluntary and unavoidable. The voluntary struggle begins when Ralph abandons his own game in order to earn a medal, while the unavoidable struggle originates from his outward appearance, which leads others to judge him unfairly. To examine the prejudice he encounters, this research applies Allport's (1954) five-level scale of prejudice: antilocution, avoidance, discrimination, physical attack, and extermination. Only avoidance and discrimination appear in the screenplay, and these are chiefly carried out by the surrounding characters toward Ralph. In sum, the research highlights the forms of struggle and the levels of prejudice, along with the harmful consequences prejudice brings to the social setting portrayed in the screenplay.

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1. Introduction

Literature plays an important role in human life. It helps people express their feelings, and it also entertains them. Safrudi (2014) states that literature is the creation of literary works through writing or expression, such as drama, short stories, and novels. Today, literature appears in many forms, including stories, poems, dramas, and movies. Many literary works reflect real life, history, society, culture, tradition, and myth. Writers also add imagination and observation to them. Pardi (2026) explains that literature is never created in a vacuum, because every work carries traces of the author's time, social class, and values (p. 1). He adds that literature does more than reflect society passively. It represents social reality in an active way, through choices about what is shown and what is left out (p. 75). Pardi and Hartika (2025) also affirm that literature can reflect complex psychological realities. In their study, a character deals with bullying, personal loss, and social prejudice. Similarly, Pardi and Sonya (2025) show how a character's personality can develop from a traumatic environment and childhood adversity. These studies show that literary works often present how people are shaped by the problems around them and how they respond to those problems. Two of the most common problems are struggle and prejudice.

People struggle when they work hard to reach their goals. They often have to give up many things along the way. McKechnie (1989) defines struggle as a task or goal that needs great effort to complete. Harmon (cited by Siregar, 2024) describes it as a process that moves a person from limited capacity toward greater potential and possibilities. Many things can make a person struggle. One of the most common causes is prejudice.

Prejudice is a serious problem in social life. Allport (1954) explains that a good definition of prejudice needs two elements. The first is an attitude of favor or disfavor. The

second is an overgeneralized and mistaken belief. Hanes and Rudd (2007) add that prejudice can cause great harm. It oversimplifies human nature and places whole races and cultures into broad categories. Because both struggle and prejudice are common in human life, writers often explore them in literary works. Pardi (2026) notes that many literary works portray conflicts that come from social differences, such as discrimination, prejudice, stereotypes, and marginalization (p. 214). According to him, these portrayals help readers understand the roots of tension between groups, and literary studies can examine whether a representation strengthens social prejudice or challenges discriminatory views (p. 216). For example, Puspita et al. (2025) studied the internal and external struggles of the main character in Danielle Steel's novel Zoya. They found that the character builds resilience and redefines her dignity, agency, and sense of meaning while facing historical upheaval. Their study shows that struggle in literature can come from a character's inner conflicts as well as from outside pressures.

One example is the screenplay of Wreck-It Ralph, written by Phil Johnston. The film was released in 2012 and directed by Rich Moore. Johnston was born on October 26, 1971, in Minnesota, United States. He is an American screenwriter and voice actor. He also wrote Zootopia (2016) and Ralph Breaks the Internet (2018). Wreck-It Ralph was a critical and commercial success. It earned about $496 million worldwide from a budget of $165 million. It won the Annie Award for Best Animated Feature. It was also nominated for the Golden Globe and the Academy Award in the same category.

The story follows Ralph, the villain of the arcade game Fix-It Felix Jr. He is tired of being the "bad guy" and feels unappreciated. He decides to prove that he can be a hero, so he sets out to win a medal, the symbol of heroism in the gaming world. On his journey, he enters other games and meets new characters. One of them is Sergeant Calhoun from Hero's Duty. Another is Vanellope von Schweetz, a glitchy character from the racing game Sugar Rush. Vanellope wants to be a racer, but the other characters exclude her because of her glitch. Ralph and Vanellope argue at first, but they slowly become friends.

Later, they find a threat that endangers the whole arcade. It comes from a Cy-Bug from Hero's Duty, which could destroy every game. Ralph and Vanellope must work together to stop it. In the end, Ralph sacrifices himself to save Vanellope and the arcade. This act changes how the other characters see him. The summary shows that the protagonist's struggle is clear in this story. Ralph tries to prove that he is equal to the other characters and deserves the same treatment. This kind of struggle is also common in real life.

This study focuses on the struggle against prejudice because it is a main problem in the screenplay. Ralph struggles to show that he is not the bad person others think he is. Many scenes show the effects of prejudice on him. This issue also appears often in society, which makes it a relevant topic for research.

The study aims to identify the types of struggle and the scales of prejudice experienced by the protagonist. The screenplay contains many topics that could be discussed. Therefore, this study is limited to the protagonist's struggle against prejudice, especially the prejudice that other characters show toward him in daily life.

2. Literature Review

Struggle is a part of every person's life. Kennedy (2016) argues that some struggles do not need to be fought to be won, because their outcomes are already predictable. Some can be won just by raising them. He adds that it takes courage, energy, and imagination to reopen an issue that others consider settled. Jones (2007) notes that everyone has personal difficulties. These may come from personality quirks, natural tendencies, or life circumstances. Centeno (2014) states that struggle is sometimes exactly what people need. In his view, people would become weak if they never faced any obstacles. Seery et al. (2010) support this view with

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evidence from a multiyear national study. They found that people with some history of adversity reported better mental health and life satisfaction than people with no adversity or with very high adversity. This suggests that a moderate amount of hardship can build resilience. Becker et al. (2023) add that the way people view struggle also matters. In their studies, people who believed that struggle can enhance them told more positive stories about their challenges, coped better, and reported greater well-being than people who saw struggle as debilitating. Sanusi (2015) explains that struggle carries values. These values form a system whose parts interact and connect with each other. They are unity, willingness to sacrifice, nationalism, and tolerance.

These views show that struggle has a serious impact on individual growth and social life. This is especially true when the struggle is caused by prejudice. Struggle takes different forms for different people. Still, it remains an important part of life because it can bring change and strength.

Maizler (2012) divides struggle into four types: negative, positive, inevitable, and chosen. Negative struggle aims to remove a deficit. It happens when a person tries to return to a normal state. An example is overcoming a phobia that limits daily life. Positive struggle aims to move a person to a more developed state. Unlike negative struggle, it does not treat a problem or illness. Examples are pursuing graduate study and writing a book. This type can still involve resistance and discomfort. Inevitable struggle comes from the losses and discomfort that are part of life. People face it automatically. A baby must adjust to a new and harder world after birth. Later, people feel grief when friends, parents, or partners die or leave. Chosen struggle comes from a personal decision. It is not an automatic part of life. Examples are climbing a mountain, studying for a graduate degree, and becoming a bodybuilder.

Allport (1954) defines prejudice as a hostile or negative attitude toward a person because he or she belongs to a group. The person is assumed to have the bad qualities of that group. Schaefer (2015) describes prejudice as a negative attitude that rejects a whole group. Prejudice can lead to unfair treatment of individuals and groups. It can also create social inequality, discrimination, and marginalization. These effects keep injustice going and make it harder to build inclusive societies.

In *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport (1954) describes five scales of prejudice. *Antilocution*. This is the first scale. People talk negatively about a group, often with like-minded friends and sometimes with strangers. It includes spreading hoaxes, making jokes about a group, and lowering a person's self-esteem. Hidayah (2023) calls it an early form of prejudice. The victim feels unsafe and uncomfortable in a majority environment because of the words used against them.

Avoidance. People avoid the group they dislike. They do not attack the group directly. According to Allport (1954), the prejudiced person handles the situation by withdrawing himself. Hidayah (2023) adds that the perpetrator does not touch or harm the victim and has no wish to do so.

Discrimination. People deny rights and opportunities to a group. It often happens to minorities. Allport (1954) explains that the prejudiced person actively treats the group unfairly. He may exclude them from jobs, housing, political rights, education, recreation, churches, or hospitals. Theodorson (1969) defines discrimination as unequal treatment based on categories such as race, ethnicity, religion, or social class. He says it describes the actions of a dominant majority toward a weaker minority.

Physical attack. This scale often follows discrimination. It is also known as a hate crime. The majority group may damage property or harm the victims. Strong prejudice can lead to violence or near-violence.

Extermination. This is the last and most dangerous scale. A whole group is destroyed, but it can also happen to individuals. For example, a person may be driven to suicide by prejudice and discrimination. Several steps come before it. One condition that supports it is weak law enforcement in society.

3. Research Method

Saunders et al. (2012) define research design as a plan for answering a specific research question. It combines the strategies and methods used to collect and analyze data. McCombes (2019) adds that a research design, or research strategy, is a systematic structure. It covers the methods for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data. This study uses a descriptive qualitative design. The aim is to describe and analyze prejudice in the screenplay of *Wreck-It Ralph*. Yilmaz (2013) describes qualitative research as an inductive, interpretive, and naturalistic approach. It studies people, phenomena, and social situations in their natural settings. It reveals, in descriptive terms, the meanings people give to their experiences. Based on this definition, a qualitative approach suits a study that needs to describe and interpret social phenomena.

Data were collected using the quoting method (metode cuplik) proposed by Sutopo (2006). First, the screenplay was read closely to understand its plot. Next, words and sentences that were relevant to the research problem and the theory were quoted and noted. Finally, the data were organized according to the research questions. The data were analyzed following Miles et al. (2014), who state that qualitative analysis is done interactively until it is complete. It consists of three activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. In this study, the analysis had five steps. First, relevant data were quoted from the screenplay based on the theory. Second, the data were reduced so that only relevant data remained. Third, the data were classified into categories according to the theory. Fourth, the classified data were displayed. Fifth, the reason why each datum was relevant to the protagonist's struggle against prejudice was described.

4. Discussion

An analysis of the dialogue in the *Wreck-It Ralph* screenplay shows two types of struggle experienced by the protagonist: inevitable struggle and chosen struggle. The analysis also shows two scales of prejudice directed at him, namely discrimination and avoidance. Each of these findings is explained in the following sections.

4.1 Type of Struggle

4.1.1 *Inevitable Struggle*

The first type of struggle found in the *Wreck-It Ralph* screenplay is inevitable struggle. Maizler (2012) explains that this type comes from losses and discomfort that are part of life and are not chosen by a person. In the screenplay, Ralph faces conditions that he did not choose. The following quotation shows this:

> RALPH (V.O.)
> My name's Ralph, and I'm a Bad Guy. I'm 9 feet tall. I weigh 643 pounds. Got a little bit of a temper on me. You know, my passions bubble very near the surface, not gonna lie.

The quotation shows that Ralph sees himself as a bad guy. This is clear in his words, "I'm 9 feet tall. I weigh 643 pounds. Got a little bit of a temper on me." The word temper suggests that Ralph cannot avoid his bad temper, which can be understood as part of the role given to him in his game. His struggle to deal with this temper is therefore an inevitable struggle. His large body also makes him look scary, and this is a natural part of who he is.

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This finding is in line with Jones (2007), who notes that difficulties in life can come from natural tendencies and circumstances that shape a person. Ralph's temper and appearance fit this view, because they are not the result of his own decision. Centeno (2014) adds that struggle is sometimes needed, since people would not grow without obstacles. For Ralph, these conditions push him to look for a way to prove his worth.

A similar result was reported by Oktaviani (2024), who used Maizler's theory to study the protagonist in Tere Liye's novel About You. She found inevitable struggle, together with positive and chosen struggle. However, her study focused on factors such as will, sympathy, encouragement, and desire. It did not examine prejudice. The present study differs because it links inevitable struggle to Ralph's appearance and to the prejudice he receives from other characters.

The following quotation also shows this situation:

RALPH (V.O.)
When Felix does a good job, he gets a medal.
(A Nicelander places a little medal around Felix's neck And gives him a peck on the cheek.)
RALPH (V.O.)
Are there medals for the sweet science of wrecking? To that I say,"Ha."
(The Nicelanders pick up Ralph and thrown him off the roof.)
RALPH
Ahhhhhhhh!
(He lands on the ground in the mud. KER-PLUNK.)
RALPH (V.O.) (CONT'D)
... And no, there are not

According to the quotation above, one of Ralph's struggles comes from the way he is programmed. His role is to wreck things, and the other characters in his game never treat him the way they treat Felix. Felix receives a medal and a kiss when he does a good job. Ralph is thrown off the roof and lands in the mud. Ralph did not choose this role, so it is an automatic condition of his life, which makes it an inevitable struggle. His question, "Are there medals for the sweet science of wrecking?", shows that he sees wrecking as a skill and as his daily work. He wonders why this work earns no reward. The answer in the next line is "no", and it shows that his role will never earn him respect from the people around him.

4.1.2 Chosen Struggle

Chosen struggle is the second type of struggle found in the *Wreck-It Ralph* screenplay. Maizler (2012) explains that this type comes from a personal decision and is not an automatic part of life. In this view, people create some of their own difficulties through the choices they make, the goals they set, and the way they respond to challenges. This idea shows that not every struggle is caused by outside forces or fate. In the screenplay, Ralph's chosen struggle can be seen in the following quotation:

RALPH
All right, Gene, you know what? I'm gonna win a medal. Oh I am gonna win a medal! The shiniest medal this place has ever seen. A medal so good that it will make Felix's medals wet their pants! And goodnight. Thank you for the party.
(Ralph exits, smashing a hole in the other side of the door.)

The quotation shows clearly what a chosen struggle is. Ralph decides to win a medal and is ready to face every challenge to get it. He says it with determination when he announces that he will win "the shiniest medal this place has ever seen" and then leaves the meeting. His decision comes from the unfair treatment he receives every day. It is a chosen struggle because it comes from his own will, not from a condition forced on him. Ralph wants to prove to everyone that he can win a medal too.

This finding is supported by Maizler (2012), who gives examples of chosen struggle such as climbing a mountain or studying for a graduate degree. Like these examples, Ralph's goal is a personal choice that requires great effort. Sanusi (2015) also states that struggle carries values, one of which is the willingness to sacrifice. Ralph shows this value when he leaves his place in his own game to pursue his goal. A similar result was found by Oktaviani (2024), who also used Maizler's theory in her study of Tere Liye's novel About You. She found chosen struggle in the protagonist and identified will and desire among the factors that drive the protagonist's struggle. In the same way, Ralph's will and desire to prove his worth drive his chosen struggle in the screenplay.

TAPPER (CONT'D)
You were saying.
RAPLH
I was saying, I can't spend another thirty years living alone in the garbage.
I'm not going back without a medal.
TAPPER
Well, I don't know what to tell you. Maybe somebody left a medal here.
You're welcome to dig through the lost and found.

The quotation shows that Ralph chooses to continue his struggle. He says he cannot spend another thirty years living alone in the garbage, and he refuses to go back without a medal. His words show strong motivation to leave his past behind and to be treated like the other characters. Tapper then suggests that Ralph look for a medal in the lost and found, which shows how far Ralph is willing to go to find one. Ralph made this decision himself, so it is a clear example of chosen struggle.

4.2 Scale of Prejudice

4.2.1 *Discrimination*

Discrimination refers to unequal treatment of individuals or groups based on particular social characteristics or group membership. Fibbi et al. (2021, p. 13) define it as unequal treatment of similar people who are in the same situation but differ in one or more characteristics. Thus, discrimination is manifested through behaviors, practices, or actions that disadvantage individuals because they are perceived as belonging to a particular social category. Pardi (2026) notes that literary works often portray conflicts between social groups, including discrimination, prejudice, and marginalization (p. 214). He adds that characters in such works often face barriers in education, work, public services, and social recognition because of their cultural identity, race, or origin, and that these portrayals help readers understand the human impact of discrimination (p. 217). Pardi and Hartika (2025) similarly show that a literary character can face bullying and social prejudice while still keeping his moral integrity. In the movie script, discrimination is represented through actions of exclusion, rejection, restriction, or unequal treatment directed toward characters because of their perceived social identity or differences. In the context of this study, see the following quotation.

RALPH (V.O.)
When Felix does a good job, he gets a medal.

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(A Nicelander places a little medal around Felix's neck And gives him a peck on the cheek.)
RALPH (V.O.)
Are there medals for the sweet science of wrecking? To that I say,"Ha."
(The Nicelanders pick up Ralph and thrown him off the roof.)
RALPH
Ahhhhhhhh!
(He lands on the ground in the mud. KER-PLUNK.)
RALPH (V.O.) (CONT'D)
... And no, there are not

The excerpt demonstrates discrimination against Ralph through unequal treatment compared with Felix. Although Ralph performs an essential role as the villain of the game, his contribution is not recognized or rewarded in the same way as Felix's heroic role. Felix receives a medal and affection from the Nicelanders for repairing the building, whereas Ralph receives rejection and is thrown from the roof. This unequal treatment illustrates discrimination because Ralph is treated negatively based on his socially assigned identity as the "villain," rather than on the value of his contribution. As Fibbi, Midtbøen, and Simon (2021) explain, discrimination involves the "unequal treatment of similar individuals" based on differences in particular characteristics. Ralph's experience therefore shows how his identity as a villain becomes the basis for his exclusion and unequal treatment within his own game.

(The game is now in hyper-realistic 3-D.)
FELIX
Good job, everyone!
(Felix and the Nicelanders exit the roof as we pan down the building and get a sense of the world.)
...
But... if I'm really honest with myself, I see Felix up there, getting pies all the time, acting like Captain Fancy. And sometimes I think...
(RALPH'S POV: Through the penthouse windows, he can see Felix being ushered over by the Nicelanders to a dinner table full of delicious, warm entrées.)
(CLOSE ON RALPH: As he speaks out-loud.)
RALPH
Man, it must be nice being the good guy.

The excerpt illustrates discrimination through Ralph's unequal treatment in comparison with Felix. Although Ralph performs an essential role in maintaining the game as the villain, he is excluded from the social recognition and privileges enjoyed by Felix. While Felix is welcomed into the penthouse and enjoys food and companionship with the Nicelanders, Ralph is left alone in the garbage dump and excluded from their social life. His statement, "Man, it must be nice being the good guy," expresses his awareness of this unequal treatment and his desire to receive the same recognition as Felix. Greenland, West, and van Laar (2022) explain that discrimination may include not only overt acts of hostility but also more subtle actions that produce discriminatory effects. Therefore, Ralph's exclusion and lack of social recognition can be understood as discrimination because his identity as the villain determines how he is treated differently from Felix, despite both being essential to the functioning of the game.

4.2.2 Avoidance

Avoidance refers to the tendency to distance oneself from individuals or groups perceived as different or undesirable. *Zhang, Gereke, and Baldassarri* (2022) identify physical avoidance as a form of subtle prejudice and a signal of exclusion in everyday social interactions. In the excerpt, Ralph experiences avoidance when he realizes that the Nicelanders hold an anniversary celebration without inviting him, while Pac-Man, a character from another game, is welcomed to the party. Ralph's statement, "They're having a party without me?" indicates his awareness of being deliberately excluded from the social gathering. Thus, the scene demonstrates avoidance through the characters' decision to distance Ralph from their social interaction because of his identity as the villain, leaving him isolated from the community in which he belongs.

> RALPH
> Happy thirtieth anniversary?
> They're having a party without me?
> (There are ice sculptures and dancing and a giant buffet table. Eating his way across the table is PAC-MAN.)

The underlined part of the script demonstrates avoidance through Ralph's exclusion from the anniversary celebration of his own game. Although Ralph is one of the main characters and performs an essential role in the game, he is not invited to the celebration, while Pac-Man, a character from another game, is welcomed by the others. Ralph's question, "They're having a party without me?" reveals his awareness of being socially excluded. Wesselmann (2023) explains that social exclusion occurs when individuals are "kept apart from others physically or emotionally," which may occur through rejection or ostracism. The exclusion becomes even more significant when Ralph discovers that Pac-Man has been invited despite not belonging to their game, as shown in his statement, "They invited Pac-Man?" This contrast indicates that Ralph is intentionally left outside the group's social interaction because of his identity as the villain. Therefore, the scene represents avoidance through social distancing and exclusion, as the other characters choose not to include Ralph in an event in which he would reasonably be expected to participate.

5. Conclusion

The findings indicate that prejudice against Ralph is manifested not only through discrimination but also through avoidance and social exclusion. Ralph is treated differently from Felix because of his identity as a "villain," even though his role is essential to the functioning of the game. Meanwhile, his exclusion from the anniversary celebration demonstrates how he is socially distanced from his own community. These two forms of prejudice reveal that Ralph's identity as a villain becomes the basis for unequal treatment, rejection, and social isolation. Therefore, Ralph's struggle arises not only from the role assigned to him but also from the negative social responses to his identity, which prevent him from receiving the recognition, acceptance, and belonging he desires.

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