The Issues Of Discrimination In John Wyndham's Novel The Chrysalids

In John Wyndham's novel, The Chrysalids, a young and innocent boy named David Strorm is raised into a cruel, anti-mutant society. David faces many obstacles and challenges due to his hidden telepathic abilities, which changes David's views on society and the people he is surrounded by. The people living in David's sadistic town, Waknuk, disapprove and isolate themselves from anything abnormal and share strong policies on “deviational” people or things that do not follow the “norm” or true image of God. Deviants are viewed with dislike because they are not described in the bible as having been created by the true form of god. When David discovers that he is telepathic and can communicate with other telepathic people through “thought shapes”, he is unsure about the dangers of his powers until he meets a girl named Sophie, who was born with an extra toe on each foot. David protects Sophie by keeping this a secret. When her secret is exposed to another boy in the community, Sophie and her parents are left with no other option but to run away. Under the circumstances, David changes the way he views people with deviations and realizes that, if his secret is discovered, he will suffer severe consequences. David denies the seriousness of Sophie's six toes by saying, “Clearly, there must be a mistake somewhere. Surely having one very small toe extra – well, two very small toes, because I supposed there would be one to match on the other foot – surely that couldn’t be enough to make her hateful in the sight of God ?” (14)

Waknukians show strong resentment and discrimination towards the Fringes people and are in fear of the mutants that live there since the community believes that they are sent by the devil to destroy their religion and tempt them away from god's purity. I chose to present my first theme, discrimination, as a balance because it symbolizes how men in Waknuk are superior to all women. Although women play a central role in Waknuk society, they are still not treated as equally as men. In Waknuk, men are unquestionably the dominant gender and are given the cruel option to disown their significant other after giving birth to three deviant infants and have automatic control over them. Some evidence from the text of this is when Aunt Harriet explained, “This is the third time. They’ll take my baby away again like they took the others. I can't stand that - not again. Henry will turn me in. He’ll find another wife who can give him proper children”. Waknuks cruel policies prevent and limit women from opportunities, privileges, and freedom. In this barbarous society, 4 women are to be considered. They are Emily Strorm, Aunt Harriet, Mrs. Wender, and Rosalind’s mother. In the novel, these women are all abused and treated like slaves. Since the consequences of challenging or going against the laws of deviations are so severe and devastating, women keep quiet as they tremble the punishment they might obtain from God or the community. They have no standpoint and are forced to follow the policies of Waknuk. For instance, Sophie's mother, Mary Wender is expected to follow the religious laws in Waknuk, but since they threaten her daughter it makes her unhappy. Mary ignores this and still wears a cross as she is forced to do so within the society.

The balance shown on my cover also illustrates Sophies' six toes because they represent the mistreatment and discrimination used against the Fringes people. In the book, Waknukians repeatedly discriminate against anything out of the norm. This includes crops, humans, and animals. Since deviations are strongly frowned upon and criticized in society, they are often killed or sent to the Fringes, where they are stranded in the wilderness and forced to survive on

their own as a form of punishment. Blasphemies are deprived of their rights to live a normal life all due to a few physical imperfections. A perfect example of this is shown by Gordon Strorm or Spider-man. Gordon Strorm once had the chance of leading Waknuk but since he was born with unusually long arms and legs, he was discriminated against and sent to the Fringes where he was thrown in a desperate state of poverty. I think this book teaches the reader many things but the most prevalent lesson is judging people by their imperfections is incorrect and unfair. In the ninth chapter, David's younger sister, Petra, uses her telepathic powers to communicate with "the thought group" when she's in distress and proves that her telepathic powers were not as harmful and evil as they were painted out to be. These powers had instead, saved Petra's life. To support this, Rosalind reveals that judging people based on small imperfections is wrong when she states that, "None of us could command like that" (84). Even Uncle Axel admits to David, in one of their chats that there is no true image for a person to look, people shouldn't judge. Axel seems skeptical and that can be observed when he says, "I'm telling you that nobody, nobody really knows what the true image is. They all think they know..." (64). The behavior and expressions used by these characters, reveal and hint that forming a false opinion and discriminating against other people is wrong.

For my second theme, I chose the bible which represents religion in Waknuk. Religion and beliefs were the main influence on the citizens of Waknuk. Without religion, none of the events that had significance in the story would have occurred. Waknuk has only one religion, but there are two important books that have made most people in Waknuk religious fundamentalists. These books are known as The Bible and Nicholas Repentances. Aunt Harriet believes in the Bible. She is most accurately described as warmhearted and sympathetic, proven by several situations in her life. Aunt Harriet had once said, "indeed I shall ask him if it is indeed his will that a child should suffer and its soul is damned" (73). She believes God is forgiving and understanding and stands by what she believes. She accepts people as they are and not based on how they appear. Joseph Storm, on the other hand, is intolerant and cruel and suggests that all deviants must be destroyed and punished. His house decoration reads, "The devil is the father of deviation" (18). Joseph believes in the Bible but mostly follows Nicholas Repentance's laws. He is a firm believer that all people outside of the norm are a false image and if discovered, they should be strictly punished because they were "created by the devil".

For my third theme, I chose the holding hand's symbol which represents unity and friendship. Several times in the book, characters offer their help to one another to achieve a goal. In The Chrysalids, we see David help out Sophie when she gets her foot stuck, Uncle Axel advising David on what to do with Anne and Alan as well as keeping his ability a secret, and Micheal staying behind for the rest of the group to save Rachel. The struggles and drawbacks that these characters go through are often minimized by their strong relationships with one another. David protects his younger sister Petra when she is in danger and also trains her with adjusting to her telepathic abilities. Many times during the book, Uncle Axel portrays a fatherly role to David and is always David's first pick when he looks for advice. The first time David met Sophie, he'd also discovered her six toes. Unlike his father, David didn't judge and accepted her for who she was. This is proven when David says, "A blasphemy was, as had been impressed upon me often enough, a frightful thing. Yet there was nothing frightful about Sophie. She's simply an ordinary girl-if a great deal more sensible and braver than most."(14). I think John Wyndham is trying to communicate through the story that it's okay to be different and that having a friend or someone to talk to is significant in our lives. Sophie and Davids reunion after all these years elucidates the unbreakable bonds of friendship built, even in the midpoint of extreme misfortune.

In conclusion, I think my themes are a good representation of the events in the story because they describe how each symbol connects to the story. The book covers a very controversial topic that is endless in today's society. Many realistic ideas that occur every day in some cultures and problems that we face in modern days are represented throughout the novel. I think this story sheds light on the darker side of history that is true and is still present in today's society throughout the world with notions such as giving an individual a different look only because of his/her appearance dominating the worldview. John Wyndham creates characters like Sophie, who look deviant and outside the norm, but are in fact, much better people than many who look like an exact replica of the “true image” to question the dominance of vision. Further, he challenges the reliability of appearances through David Strorm, who looks like an ordinary boy but is in fact, different from most people around him which demonstrates how looks can be deceiving. The book clearly argues that there is a great deal of difference between appearance and reality and the themes I chose to support that. The author also suggests that an individual's experience is the only true source of knowledge, and emphasizes the importance of questioning tradition. Therefore, I think Wyndham is trying to show the reader the issues of discrimination and the outcomes leading from it.