Dahl's View of the World—And Its Place in His Books

Several occurrences in Dahl's life can be connected to emerging values seen in his literature for adolescents. From very early in life, he was isolated from society because his mother, who was Norwegian, did not feel comfortable in English society after the death of his father (West). He grew up hearing Norwegian myths and taking annual vacations to Norway, a setting which is significantly reflected in The Witches (Howard). Dahl's mother honored his father's wishes and sent their children to English schools, despite the fact that at that time English schools stressed corporal punishment, of which Dahl's mother did not approve (West). Consequently, Dahl was removed from preparatory school when he was severely beaten with a cane after he played a prank (West). Dahl remembered those times as "days of horrors, of fierce discipline, of not talking in the dormitories, no running in the corridors, no untidiness of any sort, no this or that or the other, just rules, rules and still more rules that had to be obeyed. And the fear of the dreaded cane hung over us like the fear of death all the time" (Pendergast).

Later, Dahl attended Repton, a prestigious English private school, where the headmaster was a clergyman who flogged students without mercy (West). Such schools would later be reflected in Matilda through Miss Trunchbull, who is known for her capability to throw students great distances for offenses such as eating liquorice during scripture lessons (Matilda). The author of an unauthorized biography on Dahl comments further on the affect that Dahl's life had on his writings: "Dahl's moral universe was one in which there could be no question without an answer, no battle without victory, no irresolvable complexity. This was true of his writing, also" (Treglown). Hence, the sum of these experiences developed in Dahl the cynical view of society that is conveyed in his literature. Although most of Dahl's contemporary readers have not had the experiences that Dahl did, through his writing he establishes a common bond with all young people who have been oppressed or unfairly disciplined.

This bond is developed as a result of Dahl's societal view, characterized by the belief that authorities and social institutions, such as government and schools, should not be trusted or accepted. Mark West, after spending a great deal of time interviewing Dahl and researching his works, concludes, "In almost all of Dahl's fiction—whether it be intended for children or for adults—authoritarian figures, social institutions, and societal norms are ridiculed or at least undermined" (West). Even the heads of the armed forces do not escape Dahl's scorn of social institutions. This attitude is seen in The BFG when the Head of the Air Force and the Head of the Army are unable to devise a plan to capture the child-eating giants. Consequently, the BFG states that they become "billiﬁedugged" at any small obstacle, and the Queen calls them "rather dim-witted characters". By displaying and ridiculing their incompetence, Dahl communicates the message that heads of social institutions can not be trusted to act intelligently.

Adults, representations of authority to young people, are also dealt with harshly in Dahl's books if they dare to cause trouble for his young heroes or heroines. This treatment can be seen when Miss Trunchbull, the dictatorial headmistress of Matilda's school, becomes the target of Matilda's telepathic powers, and soon after vanishes. This instance, and many others like it, reflect Dahl's attitude that "beastly people must be punished" (Pendergast). The introduction to the Children's Literature Review (1997) entry on Dahl explains, "The morality of his writings is simple, usually a matter of absolute good versus consummate evil—with no shades of gray—and those who fall into the latter category are sure to meet with a swift and horrible end". The exception to Dahl's portrayal of adult authority figures is "his tendency to see the family as a possible source of happiness and comfort" (West).
Dahl's Positive Impact on Adolescent Readers

Many people believe that Roald Dahl's sociology may have a positive effect on readers. His view of society appeals to adolescents because it closely reflects their own perspective. First, as one critic suggests, he appeals to their "out-punching and slapstick sense of humor" as well as their "crude sense of fun and delight in jokey phrases" (Elkin). Second, young adults often experience feelings of rebellion against society that result, which is reflected by Dahl's overwhelmingly negative portrayal of adults (Telgen). The tendency of adolescents to increasingly turn away from parents and reject the authority of adults while they seek to establish unique identities is cited by Erik Erikson as characteristic of the social development of adolescents (Slavin).

Another component of Dahl's philosophy that appeals to early adolescents is the belief that good triumphs, and evil is punished or destroyed. For example, when the child-eating giants are captured in The BFG, they are thrown into a pit where they are imprisoned for life, without attempts to befriend them or draft them for some useful purpose (Rees). Belief in "the destruction or punishment of evil leads to a fourth aspect of Dahl's sociology that appeals to young people: the presence of physical violence as a means of retribution. Julia Marriage, a reviewer for The School Librarian, notes that while the violence might concern adults, "children are likely to take this in their stride, however regrettable that may be" (Telgen). These elements in Dahl's books reflect many adolescents' perspectives and provide an incentive for young people to read.

Another positive feature of Dahl's works is that they encourage young people through positive presentations of their peers at a time when many are struggling with low self-esteem and looking to peers for their identity. Literary critic Linda Taylor notes that Dahl's main characters are known for their "vivacity, originality, independence, tenacity, intelligence and resourcefulness." This is especially significant for young women, because Dahl's female protagonists, like Matilda and Sophie, are independent and are not intimidated by authority figures (West). For example, Matilda does not allow herself to become a helpless victim by refusing to let her poor home life deny her a sense of self-worth (West). When her parents refuse to buy her books, she finds the public library on her own--at the age of four (Matilda). This independence, characteristic of all Dahl's main characters, allows them to exact revenge against their oppressors (Telgen). Matilda's revenge comes when her parents are going to leave the country with them, but she manages to stay behind with her beloved teacher. However, Dahl also offers the encouragement that these young heroes and heroines--independent and resourceful--though they may be--are able to find comfort and support from older allies (Telgen). This is certainly the case in The Witches, when the main character, thinking about his grandmother, comments, "It doesn't matter who you are or what you look like so long as somebody loves you." The results of these positive elements in Dahl's works are books that appeal to and offer encouragement to young readers. These positive effects are viewed by some to be overshadowed by the possible negative effects of Dahl's view of society on adolescents.

Critics' Objections to Dahl's Books

Many challengers of Dahl's work object to his unrealistic portrayal of life. For example, David Rees, in an article published in Children's Literature in Education (1988), states, "The trouble with Dahl's world is that it is black and white--two-dimensional and unreal." Dahl's portrayal of life can be seen as a result of his overall philosophy of society. Since adults are not to be trusted, they are often portrayed as villains. Yet, Rees explains, "adults enter a child's world in a thousand different moral shapes and sizes." Very rarely does the average opposite of a Dahl villain, an audience is presented with a morally ambiguous adult, as in the case of Miss Honey, Matilda's adored teacher (Matilda). This independence, characteristic of all Dahl's main characters, allows them to exact revenge against their oppressors (Telgen). Matilda's revenge comes when her parents are going to leave the country with them, but she manages to stay behind with her beloved teacher. However, Dahl also offers the encouragement that these young heroes and heroines--independent and resourceful--though they may be--are able to find comfort and support from older allies (Telgen). This is certainly the case in The Witches, when the main character, thinking about his grandmother, comments, "It doesn't matter who you are or what you look like so long as somebody loves you." The results of these positive elements in Dahl's works are books that appeal to and offer encouragement to young readers.

Adult readers also object to the unreality of Dahl's books because in life, everything is not fair, and good does not always win. Even when the hero of The Witches is permanently turned into a mouse, the reader is assured by the main character that, "I honestly don't feel especially bad about it. I don't even feel angry. In fact, I feel rather good." (The Witches). This lack of regret is the norm in Dahl's works instead of the exception, as some feel that it ought to be.

Dahl has garnered further criticism for his portrayal of adults, which many challengers believe has a negative effect on his young readership. Throughout his work, authoritarian adults are frequently the victims of vicious revenge. However, what some find most objectionable is that adults are treated harshly even when they are innocent, such as when the main character's parents are killed in a car crash in The Witches (Ponderast). Many people believe that Roald Dahl's sociology may have a positive effect on readers. His view of society appeals to adolescents because it closely reflects their own perspective. First, as one critic suggests, he appeals to their "out-punching and slapstick sense of humor" as well as their "crude sense of fun and delight in jokey phrases" (Elkin). Second, young adults often experience feelings of rebellion against society that result, which is reflected by Dahl's overwhelmingly negative portrayal of adults (Telgen). The tendency of adolescents to increasingly turn away from parents and reject the authority of adults while they seek to establish unique identities is cited by Erik Erikson as characteristic of the social development of adolescents (Slavin).

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