

Iona College

Best Served Cold:  
The Child Reader & The Morality of Revenge According to Roald Dahl

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Roald Dahl's books have captured the imaginations of generations of child readers. Stories like *Matilda*, *The Witches*, and *Fantastic Mr. Fox* have solidified their place within the canon of children's literature. Children's literature is largely used to transmit values and beliefs to its child readers. It is not unusual for these stories to feature extreme situations: fairytales are often rife with violence, but teach basic lessons of stranger danger, the value of intelligence, and so on. Roald Dahl's stories function differently. At their core, *Matilda*, *The Witches*, and *Fantastic Mr. Fox* are all revenge narratives. In examining the child's relationship to revenge and the emotional function of revenge, it is possible to pull apart the messaging children take from these books. And, in examining the methodology of revenge, the address of systemic issues, and the character archetypes used within these novels, Roald Dahl puts forward a conditional code of morality for revenge.

*The Witches* follows an unnamed boy and his grandmother in their confrontations with witches that despise children. The story begins with the grandmother revealing she was a witch hunter, telling the boy stories of horrible things witches have done: witches turn children into slugs so that their own parents step on them, turn them into fleas so the parents use flea powder on them, or turn them into pheasants that the parents will then shoot, pluck, roast, and eat (*The Witches* 37). The grandmother clarifies that the witches don't do this out of necessity, but out of sadism: "[It gives witches] great pleasure to stand back and watch people do away with their own children" (*The Witches* 37).

The boy's parents die, and he moves in with his grandmother. On a vacation to Bournemouth, England, the boy ends up a stowaway in a meeting for the Royal Society for The Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which is a front for the meeting of the witches. In this

meeting, the witches reveal a plan to poison candy so that hours after ingesting, children turn into mice, causing their parents to set out traps, and kill them. The boy is found, and turned into a mouse. The conclusion of the novel sees him pour all of the poison into the soup that the witches eat. The boy administers large doses of the poison, causing the witches to become mice instantly, at which point they are killed by hotel staff. Both the grandmother's past as a witch hunter and the method the boy uses to stop the witches reveal the story's function as a revenge narrative. The grandmother is a former witch hunter, who surely would have been able to tell the boy how to stop the witches in several ways. Instead, the only plan ever truly discussed is poisoning them in the same way they have poisoned the boy. There's an underlying idea that the witches receive a literal taste of their own medicine. The boy enacts onto the witches the violence that had been enacted onto him. Although the potion is a way of stopping the witches, it is a personal one.

The language of revenge is often about proving a point; "They'll see," or, "I'll show them!" This is the tone the revenge in *Matilda* takes. Matilda Wormwood is a five year old genius who lives with neglectful and abusive parents. From her very first act of retribution – supergluing her father's hat to his head – Matilda makes clear she is doing this as a direct response to her parents' behavior: "She decided that every time her father or her mother was beastly to her, she would get her own back in some way or another" (*Matilda* 29). At school, another antagonist enters in the form of Miss Trunchbull, the headmistress, who is known to treat the students with immense cruelty. Trunchbull swings children by the hair, lifts them by the ears, and forces them to stand in The Chokey– a small closet lined with nails and glass– for hours on end. While on the playground, Matilda and fellow student Lavender listen to an older student, Hortensia, tell of her retribution toward Trunchbull. While listening to Hortensia's exploits with

syrup and itching powder, Matilda and Lavender look at her revenge as heroism, comparing her to a deity: "They gazed in wonder at this goddess, and suddenly even the boil on her nose was no longer a blemish but a badge of courage" (*Matilda*, 108).

*Fantastic Mr. Fox* is a story of more subtle revenge. Mr. Fox steals food for his family from the farms of Boggis, Bunce, and Bean. The three terrible farmers decide to join forces to kill Mr. Fox. They wait outside his den, planning to ambush him. They shoot off his tail. Then, the farmers try to dig him out of his burrow. Mr. Fox, Mrs. Fox, and their children dig down to safety. All of the underground animals begin to starve, as the farmers attempt to wait them out. Mr. Fox decides to dig into Boggis's chicken house, Bunce's storehouse, and Bean's cider cellar to source food. In between the first and second stops, Mr. Fox is confronted by Mr. Badger, at which point Fox invites all the other animals to their feast. Before the third stop at the cider cellar, Badger asks Fox if he is concerned about all of this theft. Mr. Fox quickly justifies their actions:

"Do you know anyone in the whole world who wouldn't swipe a few chickens if his children were starving to death?...Boggis and Bunce and Bean are out to kill us...But we're not going to stoop to their level. We don't want to kill them" (*Fantastic Mr. Fox* 59).

Mr. Fox's entire outward moral justification for his actions is that it's simply a matter of survival; at least he is not as bad as the farmers. Yet, Mr. Fox specifically searches for food at these farms instead of foraging or looking for another farm. No other options occur to him, and he relishes in the feeling of pulling one over on the farmers: "It was lovely to realize that while the fat farmer was sitting up there on the hill waiting for them to starve, he was also giving them their dinner

without knowing it" (*Fantastic Mr. Fox* 45). Mr. Fox uses survival as a moral justification for retribution against the farmers.

These books all function as revenge books in that they all have a clear sense of planning, of strategy, even if that is only revealed to the reader in pieces. The boy and his grandmother have an extensive planning session about how to administer the Delayed Action Mouse Maker in their hotel room. Matilda carefully plans each action, from borrowing her friend's parrot to asking Miss Honey the names that would have been used in her household. Mr. Fox deliberately digs to the chicken house, then the storehouse, and the cider cellar. All of the major actions by these characters are premeditated plans.

These premeditated plans largely target a single individual or group within Dahl's novels; they are focused attacks. Yet, all of the antagonists are either directly or indirectly linked to systemic issues. In *The Witches*, the larger issue is quite obvious: there are more witches that will continue to kill children. The grandmother and the boy directly discuss this and devise a plan to hunt the rest of the world's witches. *Matilda* speaks to a system of abuse. Her parents were abusive to neglectful at their best, and Miss Trunchbull was abusive toward Miss Honey. Matilda clearly cannot tackle all of the world's abusive authority figures, but after somewhat taming her own parents, she looks to help the next person, which is Miss Honey. *Fantastic Mr. Fox* speaks indirectly to destructive farming and environmental practices. Why did Mr. Fox have to steal food in the first place? Furthermore, the animals on the hill are saved from Boggis, Bunce, and Bean, but what about the other animals? Who else is at risk from farmers? Who else will be forced underground? All of these stories show their protagonists take on a manageable part of an

unmanageable problem. They represent struggle as a personal response, and this response speaks to a larger system of power.

In "Symposium on Revenge," Louise Glick puts forward that a crucial element to thinking about revenge is the way we speak about it. "The language of revenge depends wholly on the future tense: they'll see, they'll be sorry, and so on." (Glick) Revenge is always forward thinking, even though it is based on past behavior. This complicates the child's relationship to revenge. The child's relationship to time is much different than the adult relationship to time. Children are restricted by their present; the language that surrounds them is often about restrictions being lifted by the future. They can do something when they are older. When they are older, they will understand. Simultaneously, they are repeatedly reminded of their past, but in language that distances them greatly from those experiences. For example, adults always tell children that they're a big kid, they've grown up so much, and the like. Yet, when any mention of their past ages is brought up, it is usually accompanied by phrasing such as, "when you were little" or "when you were a baby." Thus, the child is restricted by the present, pushes toward the future, and is distanced from their past.

Both the language of childhood and the language of revenge are heavily focused on the future tense. So, just as revenge relies heavily on planning, so does childhood. Children are constantly asked what they want to be when they grow up, or who they want to be when they grow up. While on the surface this speaks to career aspirations, it also pulls at morality. What kind of person does the child want to be as an adult? Do they want to grow up to be like these protagonists? These books put forward that the person a child strategizes to be can and should be one that stands up for themselves and others.

However, Dahl's messaging stretches beyond children. His books often feature young protagonists; the boy in *The Witches* is seven, and Matilda is five. These are ages around that of the potential reader. Yet, the books are aimed at a reading level that is generally slightly above the ages of the protagonists, which would imply an adult may be accompanying the reading child, or reading the book aloud to them. Furthermore, Dahl's books are written in a way that makes them fun to read aloud. *The Witches* plays with a good deal of long titles. The name of the main antagonist, The Grand High Witch, is almost always written out in its entirety. Similarly, the potion is called Formula 86 Delayed Mouse Maker, and is frequently called "Delayed Mouse Maker," the longer part of the title. At the meeting of the witches, there are lengthy spells and songs that rhyme: "A stupid vitch who answers back/ Must burn until her bones are black!/ A foolish vitch without a brain must sizzle in the fiery flame!/ An idiotic vitch like you must rroast upon the barbecue!" (*The Witches* 75). Also, as seen in the spell, The Grand High Witch speaks with a thick accent; her 'w' sounds are pronounced as v, her 'v' is pronounced as 'f', she rolls her r, and speaks with elongated 'e' sounds. In *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, Mr. Fox frequently stresses words that are presented in italics, shouts, and uses formal addresses, such as "My dear old badger" (*Fantastic Mr. Fox* 47). In *Matilda*, Dahl utilizes a good deal of impassioned runs by the narrator:

"If I were a teacher, I would cook up some real scorchers for the children of doting parents. 'Your son Maximilian,' I would write, 'is a total wash out. I hope you have a family business you can push him into when he leaves school because he sure as heck won't get a job anywhere else'" (*Matilda* 8).

Dahl also plays on the sounds in names in *Matilda*; her last name, Wormwood, is alliterative, and the book features characters with names like Julius Rottwinkle, Bruce Bogtrotter, and Eric Ink (*Matilda* 110, 118,151). In all three novels, these indicators play to the adult reading the story aloud. The child is not the only one consuming the narrative; the adult is hearing it as well. Therefore, Dahl also questions his adult readers. Who do they want this child to grow up to be? And what kind of person does the adult want to be?

The questions of identity brought up by revenge plots also pose the question of the emotional function of revenge. Glick frames revenge as a young desire: "Because time to me always seemed imperiled or in short supply, I did not expect age to influence what, in my fantasy life, must have been a theoretical attitude. And yet something has changed. The fantasies have vanished, and with them, the tremendous surges of energy and stamina" (Glick). Children largely lack the perspective required for intense reasoning. Because they have experienced less, children are missing information that adults take for granted. A broken toy to an adult is a simple problem, because there are issues like employment or finances to worry about. To a child, that broken toy feels like the largest possible issue. The emotional responses of children are so much more intense because they not only lack perspective, but also lack control. An adult has the power to fix the toy, or to buy a new one. The child is not only incapable of fixing the toy for themselves, but is also incapable of putting these resulting feelings into perspective. They are consistently told what they cannot do, and must rely on adults to solve many of their issues. For children, revenge serves as a sort of coping mechanism. It provides processing and action for an emotion that would otherwise remain repressed. Dahl's works frame revenge as a catharsis. As previously discussed, in *Matilda*, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, and *The Witches*, each protagonist faces an



issue far larger than themselves. Even in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, where Mr. Fox is a parent, and thus technically an adult, his situation renders him in the power position of a child. For all of these characters, there is no issue larger than the one they face. Each protagonist has been wronged based on who they are, the inherent identity assigned to them. Trunchbull dislikes Matilda because she is a child, and her parents are abusive because she is intelligent. Mr. Fox steals food from the farmers to feed his family, because he is a fox, a scavenger. The boy is turned into a mouse because he is a child. Their place in the social hierarchy results in continued persecution, which is exhausting. Their reactions are a release to a building emotion. Matilda states this far more explicitly than most texts, as Matilda makes the decision to create her own agency:

"The anger inside her went on boiling and boiling, and as she lay in bed that night she made a decision. She decided that every time her father or her mother was beastly to her, she would get her own back in some way or another. A small victory or two would help her to tolerate their idiocies and would stop her from going crazy" (*Matilda* 29).

Matilda's revenge is a direct result of her repressed anger toward her parents. Her "small victories," her acts of revenge, make her emotions bearable.

A similar pattern occurs in *The Witches*. Following the episode at the hotel where the boy turns the convention of witches into mice, he and his grandmother discuss what will happen going forward. The grandmother explains that even though the Grand High Witch and all of the English witches are gone, there are international witches that will step up to take their place. The boy is upset at this: "'Oh no!' I cried, ' That means everything we did was for nothing! Have I become a mouse for nothing at all?'" (*The Witches* 199). The grandmother responds that they did help, they saved the children of England. The boy replies, "I know! I know!" (*The Witches* 199).

This exchange shows that for the boy, it wasn't just about saving the children. He became a mouse before they decided to take action, not in the course of taking out the witches. His "I know!" reveals a deeper anger, a deeper pain, a feeling of hopelessness. Yes, of course he wants to save the other children. But it cannot be ignored that he also wants the witches to suffer. Just after this, there is an extended exchange between the boy and Grandmamma in which they flesh out their plan to go after the rest of the witches, escalating in excitement as they go. The pair are noted as "shouting," "leaping," and "crying" (*The Witches* 206). This isn't a solemn, stressful meeting. It acts as an invigorating planning session, something to look forward to. There's a delight in planning the downfall of the witches; it acts as a catharsis for the wrongs that have been done to them.

The revenge plot serves more than the characters within a story, it also acts as a catharsis for the reader. There's a satisfaction in seeing the witches turned to mice that goes beyond seeing the hero prevail. There is a sense of gratification in seeing evil, systemic wrongs punished. Dahl ensures that the actions by taken by the protagonist are morally sanctioned. Early on in *Matilda*, Mr. Wormwood tears up Matilda's library book, and instead of reacting, she immediately begins to plan. She borrows her friend's parrot and shoves the cage up the chimney. When it begins to talk, the whole family reacts, thinking the voice they hear is a burglar. Matilda takes the lead and threatens the "burglar":

"Come on!" Matilda cried and she burst into the room, brandishing her knife. 'Stick em' up!' she yelled. 'We've caught you!' The others followed her, waving their weapons. Then they stopped. They stared around the room. There was no one there" (*Matilda* 46-47).

There's a joy in watching Matilda lead the others into foolish action. There's a suspense in hoping her family doesn't catch her. The reader is made to feel intelligent, in on the secret, and on the side of Matilda, the side of moral superiority. And so, there is a deep contentment that follows watching the family look dense. Matilda's father tearing up her library book is an attack on one of the few things she values, it's horrible, violent, and personal. It is a clear violation, and expressly morally wrong. So, seeing the father's terror when the family theorizes the voice is actually a ghost provides an intense feeling of fulfillment.

*Fantastic Mr. Fox's* Boggis, Bunce, and Bean are deplorable figures. Boggis is gluttonous, and Bunce is noted as having a "beastly temper" (*Fantastic Mr. Fox*, 2). The children of the town sing that all three are "horrible crooks" (*Fantastic Mr. Fox* 6). They say awful things, like Bunce "wanting to rip his [Fox's] guts out," Bean wants to "string him up," and all three have no problems killing the children as well as Mr. Fox (*Fantastic Mr. Fox* 9, 20, 14). Seeing the tables turned on the farmers, after witnessing their threats, treatment of the Foxes, and treatment of each other is satisfying for the reader. Mr. Fox discusses his own satisfaction: "It was lovely to realize that while the fat farmer was sitting up there on the hill waiting for them to starve, he was also giving them their dinner without knowing it" (*Fantastic Mr. Fox* 45). And this satisfaction is increased even further for the reader, who can see the extent of the farmers' bumbling. These are bad people, and the karmic justice of the moment reassures the reader that evil does not fare well. Towards the end of the novel, Mr. Fox's morality is affirmed: he has saved his family from starvation, and shared the bounty with the other underground animals. He is not so much a thief, but a Robin Hood figure, redistributing wealth from those who cause harm to those who are helpless. So the novel's ending, while open ended, provides an immense sense

of closure: "They [The Farmers] sat there by the hole, waiting for the fox to come out. And so far as I know, they are still waiting" (*Fantastic Mr. Fox* 81). It sits well with the audience that these atrocious figures, who function as part of a larger systemic problem, are effectively stumped, partially by Mr. Fox, and partially by their own insistence on violence.

The witches serve as a surrogate for the worst kind of evil. They don't just kill children, they revel in the process. They make up creative plans to have the parents do the actual killing of the child, and in some cases, trick the parents into eating their children. The witches' plan to turn all children into mice, which will in turn get killed by their parents, is functionally an attempt at genocide. Not only does the reader get to see a massive evil stopped, it comes from the boy they had just turned into a mouse, and a woman they take no notice of. The kitchen staff go after the mice with knives, frying pans, and wine bottles. The witches don't just die, they suffer the same cruel fate they would have enacted onto thousands of children. The representation of evil is killed.

On top of moral considerations, Dahl's protagonists are successful and shown to be right because they carefully consider their plans. They don't act rashly or impulsively, but rather hold onto their hurt, anger, or panic and channel it toward productive, thought out action. Matilda is a prime example of this. Before the episode with the parrot, she watches Mr. Wormwood tear up her book:

"Most children in Matilda's place would have burst into floods of tears. She didn't do this. She sat there still and white and thoughtful. She seemed to know that neither crying nor sulking got anyone anywhere. The only sensible thing to do when you are attacked is, as Napoleon once said, to counter-attack" (*Matilda* 41).

It is not that Matilda isn't angry or sad, as it is likely she is both, but she knows where her power lies. In citing Napoleon, Matilda acts as a sort of general. She uses her hurt, her anger, to strategize and plan, which is a necessary component of revenge. Her actions are well-considered, and in that consideration, she gains a credibility with the reader. The audience already knows she is intelligent, and her interactions with the librarian prove she is as nice and sweet as the narrator claims. All of these factors, coupled with the credibility of careful planning, indicate that she is right.

Mr. Fox also questions his plan, before even mentioning it to his wife and children. Without having been told the plan, his wife and children encourage him. Their faith in him is so great that they encourage him to pursue it, still without knowing what it is. It is only after Mr. Fox has thought about it extensively, and with the encouragement of his family, that he finally puts his plan into action.

As previously mentioned, the boy and Grandmamma partake in an extensive planning session at the end of *The Witches* in which they craft a scheme to take out the rest of the world's witches. But the planning does not begin there; every action the boy takes against the witches throughout the novel has been carefully talked through with his grandmother. Just after the boy discovers the witches and they turn him into a mouse, he returns to his hotel room to meet with his grandmother. He is calm in the lead up to their discussion: "I honestly don't feel especially bad about it. I don't even feel angry" (*The Witches* 126). They spend a long while talking through the logistics of his plan, and the risks. This extensive talk with his grandmother lends the boy credibility in the eyes of the audience.

Most conflict narratives for children feature "the good guys" versus "the bad guys." Fairytales function like this, wherein the characters remain relatively flat. Those who are good, like Red Riding Hood, remain good where those who are bad, like the wolf, remain bad. As children grow, the narratives and characters given to them gain complexity. The protagonists become multidimensional first, usually facing a moment of questioning or a small flaw that make them more relatable. In the mean time, the antagonists remain flat, entirely evil, and an easy force to root against. This pattern is seen in dozens of children's chapter books, such as *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which are aimed at roughly the same ages as Dahl's books. It's the same pattern Dahl utilizes in *The Witches*, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, and *Matilda*. Through this pattern, certain archetypes appear in Dahl's work: the near-perfect protagonist, the secondary child, the adult sidekick, and the evil antagonist.

As briefly mentioned above, Dahl's protagonists are nearly perfect. They are unbelievably good people, very intelligent, and incredibly capable. There is usually one moment of questioning or a small mistake that serves to remind the reader they are not unreal; these moments mark the character as slightly flawed, and human. In *The Witches*, the boy is consistently unaffected by tragedy, and always prioritizes his grandmother. After his parents have died, he is sent to live with Grandmamma in Norway. Upon reading the will, the pair are to move back to England, where the boy has been raised. Where most children would find comfort in this, the boy is upset: "But why?...Why can't we stay here in Norway? You would hate to live anywhere else! You told me you would" (*The Witches* 34). Later, the witches turn the boy into a mouse. This would be cause for an intense emotional reaction. However, almost immediately afterwards, his concern continues to be for his grandmother: "I know what I am, but the funny

thing is that I honestly don't feel especially bad about it. I don't even feel angry. In fact, I feel rather good. I know I'm not a boy any longer and I never will be again, but I'll be quite alright as long as there's always you to look after me" (*The Witches* 127). Beyond this emotional control, he is extraordinarily capable, even as a mouse. While his grandmother helps him with the details, the plan to give the witches the Delayed Action Mouse Maker is initially the boy's. He carries out the plan entirely by himself, and gets out of the witch's hotel room undetected. The second section of his plan is where his flaw occurs. The boy gets distracted while swinging around in the kitchen, because he is enjoying himself so much. His lack of focus causes one of the chefs to cut off his tail. In an otherwise flawless plan, this loss serves to make the boy more relatable.

In *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, Mr. Fox is incredibly clever and pulls off astonishing tasks. Like the boy in *The Witches*, Mr. Fox prioritizes his family. He won't let his wife help look for food because he knows she is exhausted, and won't tell the children of his plan because if they "failed to get there (which is very possible) [they] would die of disappointment" (*Fantastic Mr. Fox* 38). Beyond this, his excellence is cited by those around him. Mrs. Fox ensures her children know this, saying: "I should like you to know that if it wasn't for your father we should all be dead by now. Your father is a fantastic fox" (*Fantastic Mr. Fox* 19). She reiterates this sentiment after one of the children returns with a chicken from Boggis's Chicken House Number One. Badger says he loves him, and credits him with saving the lives of everyone underground. In the beginning of the novel, it is Fox's ego that gets him in trouble: "But Mr. Fox would not have been so cocky had he known where the three farmers were waiting at that moment" (*Fantastic Mr. Fox*, 11). Moments later, Fox is not careful enough, and the farmers shoot off his tail. Like the boy's distraction, Mr. Fox's ego serves as the flaw that gives him relatability.

The narrator's very first description of Matilda is that she is "extraordinary, and by that I mean sensitive and brilliant" (*Matilda* 10). By age two she had perfect speech, by three she had taught herself to read, and at four she had memorized the only book in the Wormwood house, a cookbook. After this, she took herself to the library, and read every children's book they had, before moving on to adult classics. Like the boy in *The Witches*, Matilda also displays incredible emotional control. She is consistently polite to her parents, even in the face of their abuse. She does not cry or yell at their poor treatment of her. Mr. Wormwood tears up Matilda's library book; where most would react intensely, Matilda "sat there still and white and thoughtful. She seemed to know that neither crying nor sulking got anyone anywhere. The only sensible thing to do when you are attacked is, as Napoleon once said, to counter-attack" (*Matilda*, 41). Almost every time Matilda is faced with abuse or difficulty, she remains composed and thoughtful. Instead of focusing on her present, she plans her future reactions. While remarkably in control of her emotions for most of the book, Matilda screams back at Trunchbull when she is accused of putting a salamander in the headmistress's water pitcher. While this incident is what ultimately leads to the discovery of Matilda's powers, it also leads Trunchbull to focus on her more intently. This singular outburst humanizes Matilda, even as it spurs her telekinetic powers. All three of these protagonists, while relatable, remain figures to look up to in their near perfection.

Dahl then uses a secondary character archetype to provide contrast to the protagonist. This character usually is not entirely bad, often just misguided and far more heavily flawed. In *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, this character is Badger. Badger questions Mr. Fox's theft, is less clever, and far more hesitant in his actions. He goes along with Mr. Fox's plan, and ultimately receives a



happy ending as he is invited to Fox's feast. His presence makes the audience greater appreciate Fox's wit.

The secondary characters in *The Witches* and *Matilda* are less likable than badger. In *The Witches*, this character is found in Bruno Jenkins, another child guest at the hotel, and his initial description is less than charitable. The narrator notes him as someone he "didn't care for...He was one of those boys who is always eating something whenever you meet him...What's more, Bruno never stopped boasting about how his father made more money than my father and that they owned three cars" (*The Witches* 99). The boy says he saw him burning ants with a magnifying glass. Bruno is dense, and doesn't realize he has been turned into a mouse until the boy points out his paws. Other than these factors, the audience does not hear much about him. He follows the boy without hesitation, and while not helpful, is unobtrusive for the rest of the novel. He is present, but neither a help nor a hindrance. The sole functions of his character are to display to the boy what the process of turning a child into a mouse looks like, and to provide a foil to the boy.

There are a good deal of other children featured in *Matilda*, but the one that functions as the secondary character is Matilda's older brother, Michael Wormwood. Although there are points in which Matilda and Michael are both present, interaction between the two is almost nonexistent. Michael receives almost no attention from the narrator, so any impression of him is gained through conversation between Michael and The Wormwoods. The first time the reader hears from Mr. Wormwood, he is detailing how he scams customers. Mr. Wormwood describes how he mixes oil with sawdust to get a car to stop rattling temporarily, and then teases the idea of sharing how he fakes a car's mileage. Where Matilda is appalled and reproachful, Michael,

"fascinated" asks how it is done (*Matilda* 22). As the conversation continues, Michael seems to be engaged and in awe of his father. When Mr. Wormwood ends a section of a story with "You couldn't do it!," Michael agrees, saying, "Of course you couldn't" (*Matilda* 24). When Mr. Wormwood stresses his own intelligence by saying, "Eureka!...I got it!," Michael is invested, asking, "What did you do, dad?" (*Matilda* 24). When Mr. Wormwood mentions these things are "trade secrets," Michael quickly agrees to silence while Matilda comments that it's "dirty money" (*Matilda* 25). All of these secondary characters are key to how the child reader understands the protagonist. The villainy of the antagonist, which was addressed previously, acts as the polar opposite of the protagonist; compared to the antagonist, the protagonist is obviously incredible. But the foil dynamic between these secondary characters and the protagonist reaffirms the morality of the protagonist to a higher degree: it's not that the protagonist is just a better person than the antagonist. They're also a better person than many of the people that surround them.

As discussed earlier, the antagonists are outrageously villainous, often persecute the protagonist for their identity, and are indicative of a larger systemic issue. Dahl marks his antagonists with characteristics that are conventionally considered unattractive. Mr. Wormwood is noted to be a "ratty-looking man" who wears "jackets with brightly colored checks" and yellow or green ties (*Matilda* 23). Mrs. Wormwood has "one of those unfortunate bulging figures where the flesh appears to be strapped in all around the body to prevent it from falling out" (*Matilda* 27). Trunchbull, who acts as Matilda's ultimate obstacle, is given a monstrous description. The narrator calls her "a most formidable female," whose athletic past can be seen in her "bull neck, in the sinewy wrists and in the powerful legs. Looking at her, you got the feeling this was someone who could bend iron bars and tear telephone directories in half" (*Matilda*

82-83). After noting her intimidating stature, the narrator comments on her general appearance. Her face "was neither a thing of beauty nor a joy for ever. She had an obstinate chin, a cruel mouth, and small arrogant eyes" (*Matilda* 83) Dahl makes Trunchbull, quite literally, larger than life. Not only does she hold the power position as headmistress, but she is physically intimidating and frightening. It distances her from the human concepts the reader has been given in *Matilda* and *Miss Honey*.

In *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, the farmers are largely distanced from the animals in the cruel ways they treat their prey, as well as each other. Yet, just after the setting, the farmers are the first concept introduced to the reader. Their appearances all depict different physical extremes. Boggis is "enormously fat...because he ate three boiled chickens smothered with dumplings every day for breakfast, lunch, and dinner" (*The Witches* 2). His appearance is immediately linked to his gluttony, and thus, moral corruption. Dahl then repeats this pattern with Bunce, who was a "pot-bellied dwarf. He was so short his chin would have been underwater in the shallow end of any swimming pool in the world...He mashed the [goose] livers into a paste and then stuffed the paste into the doughnuts. This diet gave him a tummy-ache and a beastly temper" (*The Witches* 3). Bean doesn't eat food, but rather drinks "gallons of strong cider," and is "thin as a pencil" (*The Witches* 4).

When they are out of their human disguises, the witches are visually appalling as well. From his hiding place, the boy describes the crowd of witches: "I simply cannot tell you how awful they were, and somehow the whole sight was made more grotesque because underneath those frightful scabby bald heads, the bodies were dressed in fashionable and rather pretty clothes. It was monstrous" (*The Witches* 70). By pulling out the difference between the witch and

the clothes she wears, Dahl again plays on the contrast of what the reader views as good and human. He is able to go much further with his imagery of the witches than with Trunchbull or the farmers, because the witches do not have to adhere at all to human appearance. The witches have claws, no toes and large noses. In the description of The Grand High Witch, Dahl elicits a sense of the macabre:

"That face of hers was the most was the most frightful and frightening thing I have ever seen. Just looking at it gave me the shakes all over. It was so crumpled and wizened, so shrunken and shrivelled, it looked as though it had been pickled in vinegar. It was a fearsome and ghastly sight. There was something terribly wrong with it, something foul and putrid and decayed. It seemed quite literally to be rotting away at the edges, and in the middle of the face, around the mouth and cheeks, I could see the skin all cankered and worm-eaten, as though maggots were working there way in there" (*The Witches* 66).

Words and phrases such as "pickled in vinegar," "ghastly," "putrid," "rotting away," and "worm-eaten" play on the reader's gut reaction. The association with these words for the reader is unlikely to be based in horror movies, considering their age, but might be associated with images they have been taught are scary. The visceral nature of the words enforces the witches as a dark other.

The last archetype, the adult sidekick, is key in sanctioning the protagonist's revenge as moral. This figure is always well-beloved by the protagonist, and is usually slightly less remarkable than the protagonist. The adult sidekick informs, advises, and nurtures the protagonist but never takes action with them. It is signaled to the reader that these characters are good because of how the near-perfect protagonist attaches to them. For the boy in *The Witches*,

this figure is Grandmamma. The boy says he "absolutely adores" her, and he feels closer to her than his mother. She is also a "wonderful storyteller" and a former witch hunter (*The Witches* 12). The grandmother has boundless knowledge about the witches. She is the one who warns the boy about their sadism, and knows all of their traits. She knows to look for wig lines to hide bald heads, gloves to mask claws, and large nostrils to smell children. Without her expertise, the boy would be unable to attempt his plan, and would likely die. She advises the boy very directly, particularly in planning the theft of the Delayed Action Mouse-Maker. Her direct consent and help in discussing the plan marks it for the reader as moral, as she has been posed as a revered figure throughout the novel.

For Matilda, the adult sidekick is Miss Honey. Miss Honey is "mild and quiet," with a "curious warmth" and there is "no doubt she possessed that rare gift for being adored by every small child under her care" (*Matilda* 66-67). Miss Honey is the first adult to truly advocate for her. Upon discovering the extent of Matilda's intellect, Miss Honey immediately confronts Miss Trunchbull, a figure that has abused and taken everything from her, in order to get Matilda the education she deserves. When this fails, she uses her free evening to visit the home of the Wormwoods in an attempt to ensure Matilda's intelligence is being nurtured in some capacity. When Matilda goes to Miss Honey about her telekinesis, she does not turn Matilda away, but questions and encourages her to practice. By sharing the story of her own abuse, Miss Honey empathizes with Matilda. Miss Honey trusts her. When Matilda mentions she has a plan, Miss Honey only suggests she stop so that Matilda is not punished on her behalf. Yet, she relents, and says, "don't do anything silly" (*Matilda* 209). Internally, Matilda has Miss Honey's support: "It was extraordinary, she told herself, how this little snippet of a girl seemed suddenly to be taking

charge of her problems, and with such authority, too" (*Matilda* 208). Miss Honey's ability to save herself from Trunchbull grants her bravery in the reader's view. Her advocacy and persistence in ensuring Matilda is nurtured shows her compassion. Through this, she is established as a positive force. She speaks to Matilda as an equal, and respects her talents, which reinforces the morality of Matilda's actions.

As discussed previously, while Mr. Fox is an adult, the oppressive forces around him render him to the power position of a child. In this situation, his adult sidekick is his wife, Mrs. Fox. Mr. Fox proposes he risk getting shot to go hunt for food. Mrs. Fox immediately forbids this, and he listens, showing the weight her judgement has. When he initially comes up with his plan, Mr. Fox is hesitant, and, without even hearing it, Mrs. Fox silently encourages him. She stands, as if to help Mr. Fox and the children dig, but is too weak. Throughout the novel, she consistently advocates for him, reminding her children, and later, their dinner guests, that her husband is clever and the savior of everyone underground.

These character archetypes grant their protagonists, particularly their child protagonists, a good amount of agency. It is the protagonist that hatches the plan, and executes the main actions. The failure or success falls to them. Yet, it restricts them with the presence of the adult sidekick. The adult sidekick always holds weight, and continuously has a say. Even in cases like *Fantastic Mr. Fox* and *Matilda* where the sidekick does not directly address the revenge, their presence and support of the protagonist plays a large role in determining the morality of the protagonist's actions.

Through peripherally addressing systemic issues, placing stress on planning and methodology, and his use of character archetypes, Dahl's books put forward a conditional version

of the idea that the ends justify the means. In order for the act to continue to be moral, the protagonist must be endorsed through the figure of the adult sidekick. Furthermore, the end result must serve a larger good. The main point of the action can be the defense of the protagonist, but there is also an address of the broader picture, whether that is the wellbeing of the rest of the creatures underground, ensuring Miss Honey receives what is hers, or making sure the children beyond England are safe. In addition to the broader picture within the stories, there must also be an address of systemic issues, like abuse, issues with the environment, and systematic killing. These issues don't serve as the main thrust of the narrative, but there is a consistent acknowledgement of others that have suffered. Dahl's stories don't leave room for adults to solve issues because it is consistently adults and positions of authority that cause the issues in these books. The child figures in these books must see themselves as strong, brave, and clever in order to take on their own challenges.

These books endorse a form of revenge, which is generally frowned upon. Adults largely control which books children access, and Roald Dahl's are continually encouraged. These books are read and re-read by children across the globe. Yet, these books are not banned or discouraged. Understanding the child reader's relationship to revenge and their relationships to these stories is important to grasping the messaging. There's a signaling that these acts of revenge are not peer to peer. There is no punching down. These stories feature standing up for themselves in the face of authority. In that, it encourages children to see themselves the same way the protagonist does. The reader must also believe that they are strong, brave, and clever, and in that, they are capable of using their agency to problem solve, to stand up in the face of injustice for themselves and others.

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Roald Dahl at his brilliant, hypnotizing best, cooking up some of the most unusual stories ever told. Here in one volume are \*Tales of the Unexpected\* and \*More Tales of the Unexpected\*, making this a superb compendium of vengeance, surprise and dark delight. Horror / History & Fiction.Â Roald Dahl. Dannyâ€™s life seems perfect: his home is a gypsy caravan, heâ€™s the youngest car mechanic around, and his best friend is his dad, who never runs out of wonderful stories to tell. And when Danny discovers his fatherâ€™s secret, heâ€™s off on the adventure of a lifetime. Hereâ€™s Roald Dahlâ€™s famous story about a 9-year-old boy, his dad, and a daring and hilarious pheasant-snatching expedition. Roald Dahl. MATILDA. Illustrations by Quentin Blake.Â The only movement from the reader was the lifting of the hand every now and then to turn over a page, and Mrs Phelps always felt sad when the time came for her to cross the floor and say. ; "It's ten to five, Matilda." During the first week of Matilda's visits Mrs Phelps had said to her, "Does your mother walk you down here every day and then take you home?"Â Mrs Phelps was concerned about the child's safety on the walk through the fairly busy village High Street and the crossing of the road, but she decided not to interfere. Within a week, Matilda had finished Great Expectations which in that edition contained four hundred and eleven pages. "I loved it," she said to Mrs Phelps. Roald Dahl. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Jump to navigation Jump to search.Â their children to be educated in English schools, which he considered the world's best.[19]. Dahl first attended The Cathedral School, Llandaff. At age eight, he and four of his friends were caned by the headmaster after putting a dead mouse in a jar of gobstoppers at the local sweet shop,[5] which was owned by a "mean and loathsome" old woman named Mrs. Pratchett.[5] The five boys named their prank the "Great Mouse Plot of 1924".[20] Gobstoppers were a favourite sweet among.Â According to Dahl's autobiography, Boy: Tales of Childhood, a friend named Michael was viciously caned by headmaster Geoffrey Fisher.