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 effect 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" (x). 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 "biffsquiggled" 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" (in 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).
In Dahl's books, with the exception of Matilda, family members are willing to support one another, even against the rest of the world. This is evident in the relationship between the main character and his grandmother in _The Witches_. For example, after the protagonist has been turned into a mouse and shares his plan to eliminate all the witches in England with his beloved teacher, the older woman agrees to help him. This is certainly the case in _The Witches_, when the main character, thinking about his grandmother, comments, “I don't care what you think,” he tells his would-be friends, “my grandmother is my weapon of choice” (Telgen). This is due to the woman’s kindness, understanding, and support for him throughout the book.

Dahl's Positive Impact on Adolescent Readers

Many people believe that Roald Dahl's books 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 “guilt-punching and slapstick sense of humor” as well as their “crude sense of fun and delight in jokey phrases” (Erikson, 1997). Second, young adults often experience feelings of rebellion against those who are responsible for their well-being, which is reflected by Dahl's overbearing and defensive portrayal of adults (Telgen). The tendency of adolescents to increasingly break 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 (Telgen). 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, 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 “naive, solitary, independence, tenacity, intelligence and resourcefulness.” This is especially significant for young women, because Dahl's female protagonists, like Matilda and Sophie, are independent and 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 force her 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 (Matilda). This is certainly the case in _The Witches_, when the main character, thinking about his grandmother, comments, “I don't care what you think,” he tells his would-be friends, “my grandmother is my weapon of choice” (Telgen). The results of these positive elements in Dahl's works are books that appeal to and offer encouragement to young adults. Yet, 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_ (1998), 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 adult have the honor of being depicted as a good guy. In _Matilda_, the main character's parents are killed in a car crash in _The Witches_ (Pandergras). Dahl's Myra Pollack Sadker and David Miller Sadker have accused Dahl of ageism, and of conveying the message that “the needs and desires and opinions of old people are totally irrelevant and inconsequential.” Some believe that presenting adolescents with such a view of adults—especially when they are experiencing conflicts emotions about adults in their lives—could adversely affect their relationships with older people. Commenting on this attitude, Bruno Bettelheim, author of _The Uses of Enchantment_, points out its limitations:

> There is a widespread refusal to let children know that the source of much that goes wrong in life is due to our very own nature—the propensity of all men for acting aggressively, selfishly, out of anger and anxiety. Instead, we want our children to believe that, inherently, all men are good. But children know that they are not always good; and often, even when they are, they would prefer not to be (in Hitchens).

It is this inclination to pretend that all people are good that Dahl challenges, and consequently his literature attracts opposition from many adult sources.

The final major concern of critics of Dahl's works is his treatment of important issues, and how that treatment might affect his readers. This concern is especially relevant when considering _The Witches_, ninth on the list of the most frequently banned books in the 1990s (Footnote). Dahl has been accused of sexism by feminists in England, and has been criticized for his negative portrayal of witches by witches' societies in the United States. These critics point to statements such as the following in making their case against Dahl:

> "But the fact remains that all witches are women. There is no such thing as a male witch" (Telgen, _The Witches_). However, his critics often ignore the statement that follows the first: “On the other hand, a ghost is always a male” (The Witches). When questioned about this issue, Dahl defended his work by pointing to the “lovely grandmother, who is one of the major characters in the story” (Telgen). The grandmother's character is communicated to the reader early in the book when the main character says, “The fact that I am still here and able to speak to you... is due entirely to my wonderful grandmother” (The Witches). Dahl claims that the previous accusations are unfounded because of the courage and wisdom that the grandmother displays, in addition to her encouragement of unorthodoxy (Tregloan). He does not concern himself with the possibility that certain groups of adults might be offended, but concentrates on entertaining his readers.

Dahl's treatment of the issue of child neglect has also been criticized. This view is based on the fact that Matilda is treated by her parents, at least from her perspective, “as nothing more than a scab. A scab is something you have to put up with until the time comes when you can pick it off and flick it away” (Matilda). One reviewer, Anna A. Flowers, concludes, “I found this depressingly characteristic of Dahl's attitude toward children” (Flowers). However, Matilda could also be used as an avenue for discussion with students about child abuse and neglect. Nevertheless, it leads to an unrealistic portrayal of life, a negative representation of adults, and a careless treatment of social issues. Dahl's sociology is viewed by many to be more harmful than beneficial to adolescents (Tregloan). Yet, as is often the case, controversy may lead directly to popularity.

The very controversy caused by Roald Dahl's works for early adolescents has drawn millions of teens to his books and, subsequently, encouraged them to enjoy reading. These young people found in Dahl's work something that they could not find anywhere else: an author with a view of society that was essentially identical to their own—distrustful of authority figures and firm in the belief that good will triumph. Concerning Dahl's popularity, the librarian of one middle school made this comment during the spring of 1997: “Roald Dahl's books are always on our reorder list, for copies of his books circulate so much they are worn in no time! The titles are always checked out and usually on reserve!” (Crawford). Roald Dahl's view of society, his contempt for corrupt authority figures, and his distrust of the system has made his works popular with adolescents. An expression of such values in the disguise of fantasy and humor is a rare find and one that young adolescents should be encouraged to make. Roald Dahl has certainly achieved his goal as an author because his books have provided a way for many young people to become readers.

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Works Cited


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