

คุณลักษณะที่อาจเป็นภัยในวรรณกรรมสำหรับเด็กของโรลด์ ดาห์ล

Adverse Features in Roald Dahl's Children's Literature

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Abstract

The purposes of the study are to 1) examine the adverse features depicted in Roald Dahl's selected children's stories, and 2) discuss the meanings of these adverse features. The qualitative research approach is employed for the investigation and the results are presented by means of descriptive analysis. The examination unveils that adverse features are abundantly portrayed in ten Dahl's books for children: *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *The Magic Finger* (1966), *The Enormous Crocodile* (1978), *The Twits* (1980), *George's Marvelous Medicine* (1981), *The BFG* (1982), *The Witches* (1983), *Matilda* (1988), and *The Minpins* (1991). The adverse features appearing in these books can be regarded as the writer's dystopian ideologies which were assumably stimulated by his painful childhood and tragic adulthood experiences. Although these Dahlian writings for children are categorized as fantasy stories, it is believed that the adverse features realistically manifest some truths of living aspects to the child audience.

Keywords: children's literature, adverse features, Roald Dahl's children's stories

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อ 1) ศึกษาคุณลักษณะที่อาจเป็นภัยที่พบในวรรณกรรมสำหรับเด็กของโรอัลด์ ดาห์ล 2) อภิปรายความหมายของคุณลักษณะที่อาจเป็นภัยตามที่บรรยายไว้ในวรรณกรรมสำหรับเด็กของโรอัลด์ ดาห์ล วิจัยใช้การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพและเขียนแสดงผลการวิจัยแบบพรรณนาวิเคราะห์ ผลการวิจัยพบว่าคุณลักษณะที่อาจเป็นภัยมีปรากฏอยู่เป็นจำนวนมากในวรรณกรรมสำหรับเด็กของโรอัลด์ ดาห์ล ที่นำมาวิเคราะห์ทั้งหมดจำนวน 10 เรื่อง ได้แก่ *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *The Magic Finger* (1966), *The Enormous Crocodile* (1978), *The Twits* (1980), *George's Marvelous Medicine* (1981), *The BFG* (1982), *The Witches* (1983), *Matilda* (1988), และ *The Minpins* (1991) คุณลักษณะที่อาจเป็นภัยถือได้ว่าเป็นคตินิยมที่ประกอบไปด้วยความทุกข์และสิ้นหวัง ซึ่งเกิดจากแรงกระตุ้นของประสบการณ์ที่เจ็บปวดและขมขื่นของผู้เขียนทั้งในช่วงวัยเด็กและวัยผู้ใหญ่ แม้ว่าวรรณกรรมเด็กคัดสรรของโรอัลด์ ดาห์ล จะจัดอยู่ในประเภทวรรณกรรมแบบแฟนตาซี แต่คุณลักษณะที่อาจเป็นภัยในวรรณกรรมสำหรับเด็กของโรอัลด์ ดาห์ล กลับสะท้อนให้เห็นแง่มุมความเป็นจริงบางประการของการดำรงชีวิตต่อผู้อ่านที่เป็นเด็ก

คำสำคัญ: วรรณกรรมเด็ก, คุณลักษณะที่อาจเป็นภัย, นิทานสำหรับเด็กของโรอัลด์ ดาห์ล

Introduction

In spite of sounding simple, the term children's literature cannot be viewed simply as the texts created just for someone small, young and immature. Collectively, the genre is broad and varied both in forms and styles. The use and meaning of the books written for these little audiences are heavily debated and exhaustively discussed providing generic statements about how readership of the stories intriguingly and complicatedly works for their readers (Curthew, 2006: 11).

Bettelheim, for instance, believes that children's literature contains the messages which can strongly impact on the unconscious mind of the children, shape their perception and guide their

development (1976: 6). Supported by many research studies, children can be affected emotionally and intellectually by interacting with the images in the picture books and the environment. These effects will leave very crucial and lasting impression in a child. With the ideologies embodied in the books which are read to or read by them, children will learn to form their behaviors, develop individual character traits including adopting appropriate ethical and aesthetic appreciation and social values. It reveals also that even the unborn children can be influenced by the children's stories. When listening to the books their parents read to them, they react to these voices.

Regularly reading stories to one's kids, parents can be certain that the bond between them and their children is built and higher chance of school success is likely to happen to students whose parents consistently read stories to them. It can be said that all aspects of the child development can be enhanced by reading or using children's books. To mention just some, the benefits of reading children's stories range from stretching the child's attention span, widening reader's interests in the new subjects and hobbies, obtaining new vocabulary, syntax, language basics, and providing examples to cope with feelings and problems in lives, to stimulating the child's imagination (Anderson, 2006: 17-19).

After his military service as the RAF pilot during World War II ended because of the physical injuries from the plane accident, British writer, Roald Dahl, (1916-1990) started his writing career with propagating war articles and short stories for the adults. Despite beginning his literary profession with the writings for the adult readers, it was actually the literary creations for the children which made Dahl become globally famous as a great writer. The popularity of Dahl's works with the young audiences is unquestionable since many of his children's stories still belong to the best-sellers. (Klugová, 2007: 48). Besides being nominated the nation's favorite modern children's author in 2000, Dahl was also voted by the primary school teachers as their favorite author in 2012. Statistically, his books were checked out from the libraries more than a million times a year (Maynard & McKnight, 2002: 153-154).

Nevertheless, Dahl's children's stories have been disapproved by some literary scholars and critics. Hunt, for example, evaluates that his books for the children are energetic but they are

vulgar, violent, and blackly farcical at the same time (1994: 20). Class conscious themes are accused to appear in *Fantastic Mr Fox* and *Danny the Champion of the World* while many readers regard poaching in the second book as unacceptably illegal stealing (Renen, 1985:1-7). Despite its popularity, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is still attacked for containing racism with the portrayal of the Oompa-Loompas as dark-skinned pygmies in its first version. Part of the resistances is also derived from his negative social views (Klugová, 2007: 48). The harshest disapproval would be from Landsberg who blames Dahl's children's works for containing not only racial discrimination but also sexism, sadism and false attitude. According to the review of Dahl's *The Witches*, Landsberg reasons that well-written children's literature should be full with humour of the genuine, humane, and affirmative kind. The "reek of dog excrement and red-hot sizzling hatred" found in Dahl's fiction seem to be destructive and unacceptable to be included in any writings for the young readers (1988: 90). In a similar fashion, Rees posits that Dahl works for the children embody the binary worldview which can negatively impact on the young readers. The adult characters who are depicted either as absolutely good or bad, according to Rees, appear to be unrealistic. For these reasons, it was concluded by this critic that some of Roald Dahl's works for the children are disgusting, tasteless and should have never been written at all (Rees, 1988: 143-154).

On the flip side, Dahl's works for the children have been viewed as being replete with controversies besides possessing the richly imaginative components. Certainly, his children's stories can instigate several opposite responses and feelings from the readers: laughter, tears, love, hate, fear, dreams, and imagination. Interconnections among Roald Dahl's own writings can also be observed in some books. A central character's father in *Danny the Champion of the World* talks about *The BFG* at the bedtime, for instance. Comparing to his short stories for the adults, illustration, puns and neologisms are used in his children's stories more than in those adult short stories. Regarding his popularity among the child audience, it is assumed that the success of Dahl's children's stories is derived from three key factors: the culturally increasing independence of the children of his time allowing his readers to easily relate to his individualistic child protagonists, the

booming business of children's literature in the twentieth century, and the editors' power (Klugová, 2007: 43-44).

Several literary aspects of Roald Dahl's literature for the children have been introspected from various angles. As mentioned at the initial stage of this article, children's literature cannot be perceived only superficially as the texts created for the small, naïve and inexperienced readers. In contrast, if employed appropriately, children's books are very beneficial for shaping and constructing the child readers. In *Children's Literature & Critical Theory*, May contends that only few authors simply write to waste away the time or entertain their readers. . . . [but all] writers write to tell us about life (May, 1995: 114). Based on May's statement, the researcher strongly believes that dangers, repellents, violence, offences and other unpleasant components have been purposively integrated in Roald Dahl's children's stories to provide something useful and meaningful to all little fans of the Dahlian children's literature.

This study investigates the portrayal of adverse features found displayed in the selected Dahlian stories. The benefits of this investigation are to indicate and attain the good effects of adversities found intermingled in Roald Dahl's children's stories, and to enhance an appreciation and inculcate the values of reading children's fiction into the audiences.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore adverse features incorporated in Roald Dahl's children's literature
2. To discuss the meanings and implications of adverse features found in Roald Dahl's selected children's literature

Scope of the Study

Ten Roald Dahl's children's books were chosen for this study including *James and the Giant Peach*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Magic Finger*, *The Enormous Crocodile*, *The Twits*, *George's Marvelous Medicine*, *The BFG*, *The Witches*, *Matilda*, and *The Minpins*.

Research Methodology

The qualitative research approach is employed to investigate the purposes set in the paper and results of the investigation are presented in the form of descriptive analysis.

Results

Adverse features refer to the unpleasant, weird, violent and dangerous aspects found depicted in Dahl's children's books. These traits may harm or make the child readers feel unhappy, uncomfortable, sick and scared. Nevertheless, the writer still includes these adverse elements in his children's stories in spite of the fact that these undesirable outcomes could be expected if the child readers encounter them when reading those books. In the following section, adverse elements found in ten selected Dahlian stories are presented while the writer's reasons for the use of these elements together with their meanings and implications will be delineated in the discussion and conclusion.

Table 1

Adverse features found in Roald Dahl's children's literature

Work Title	Adverse Features
<i>James and the Giant Peach</i>	Being forced to drink horrible soup
<i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i>	The Buckets' destitute living situation and bizarre penalizations of the four child antagonists
<i>The Magic Finger</i>	The teacher's absurd characterization of having tail and whiskers like a cat
<i>The Enormous Crocodile</i>	Harm from the crocodile
<i>The Twits</i>	Ridiculous relationship of the spouses
<i>George's Marvelous Medicine</i>	Unusual and detrimental ingredients of the medicine
<i>The BFG</i>	Frightening and fatal perils from the giants
<i>The Witches</i>	Disgusting depiction of the witches and lethal threats from the them
<i>Matilda</i>	Derisive and repellent portrayal of the adult antagonists
<i>The Minpins</i>	Deadly threat from the monster

Exploring all the ten selected Dahlian stories, readers will certainly be confronted by several unpleasant and harmful incidents or characters. First off, apart from encountering the ugliness of Aunts Sponge and Spiker, James Henry Trotter, the boy protagonist in *James and the Giant Peach* is required to drink a special soup cooked from the green crocodile tongues boiled in a skull of a dead witch added by the eyeballs of a lizard and ten of his own hair in order to change his miserable life to become happy. Due to poverty and destitution, Charlie Bucket of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is given only a bar of chocolate on his birthday and he will make it "last for

more than a month” (Dahl, 2008: 17). Moreover, all seven members of the Bucket family have to subsist on meager meals and they cannot afford even a second helping. In this same book, adverse circumstances appear to be intensified when other four golden ticket winners break the chocolate compound rules after they have visited Mr. Wonka’s chocolate factory: Mike Teavee is shrunk by television; Violet Beauregarde’s face is turned blue as a blueberry; Augustus Gloop is pulled into the chocolate pipe; and Veruca Salt is thrown into a garbage chute.

In addition to the above examples, bizarre and frightening incidents also occur in the next two chosen stories, *The Magic Finger* and *The Enormous Crocodile*. When the teacher in the former book calls the central girl character whose finger can cast a spell stupid, she is turned to be cat-like with whiskers and a tail. In the latter one, the children have to run for their life from the enormously wicked reptile until it is swung around and thrown up to crash the sun to explode by the elephant. Then, readers will encounter with different adverse facets presented through the unlikely and weird relationship of the unconventional couples, Mr. and Mrs. Twits of *The Twits*. Being the villain protagonists of the story, both fictional characters have been created to fully embody all horrible qualities. While Mr. Twit is foul, filthy, and hirsute, Mrs. Twit is portrayed as the woman whose awful thoughts abolish all her former beauty turning her to be hideously ugly, spiteful, and loathsome. She puts worms in Mr. Twit’s spaghetti and often scares him with her glass-eye. Not less malicious, Mr. Twit hides a frog under the bed sheet with the aim to frighten his own wife. By cutting her cane and lengthening her chair’s legs bit by bit, Mr. Twit can cunningly mislead his wife to understand that she is seriously sick from the shrinks, a kind of illness which causes her to get smaller and smaller. To put it another way, it seems that they are preoccupied with devising pranks to play on each other on daily basis. However, the two will co-work only when they want to threaten the children or torture their pet monkeys, the Muggle Wumps.

Adversity can also easily be indicated from the ingredients which George Kranky, the protagonist of *George’s Marvelous Medicine*, adds in the saucepan to cook the potions to cure his grumpy, bossy and mean grandma. Thinking that his grandma who enjoys eating worms and

insects must be sickened by the witch, the boy walks around the house gathering golden gloss hair shampoo, toothpaste, super foam shaving soap, vitamin enlighten face cream, nail vanish, hair remover, false teeth cleaning powder, deodorant, paraffin, hair spray, perfume, pink plaster powder, lipsticks, washing powder, floor polish, curry powder, chilli sauce, brown paint etc., and put them all in the cooking pot hoping that after the concoction has been taken by his unlikely senior relative, she will be transformed to be normal like the other ordinarily kind and nice grandmas.

In Roald Dahl's next two children's books, *The BFG* and *The Witches*, adverse situations befall to the child protagonists, Sophie and the unnamed boy, whenever they have to confront with the child-eating giants and the witches. Perusing both the repulsive depictions of the witches and the giants and the vindictive and cruel actions of these mythical creatures (those of the witches in the second story in particular), any sensitive readers will be evoked to suffer these unfavorable and harmful conditions physically and emotionally. Some children may feel nauseous and panic and want to vomit if they picture along Dahl's vivid description of the smelly, decayed, and scary images of these abject fictional creatures, the giants and the witches. The giants' colossal bodies and the witches' horrific faces, bald heads, blue spits and toeless feet can powerfully stir both the feelings of disgust and fear in the readers' mind.

Likewise, adverse aspects reside in both the ridiculous appearances and unethical deeds of the adult antagonists who happen to be the child protagonist's father and head teacher, Mr. Harry Wormwood and Miss Agatha Trunchbull of *Matilda*, the ensuing Dahlian book. Besides being obnoxious, dishonest and brash, Mr. Wormwood is described as "a small ratty-looking man whose front teeth stuck out underneath a thin ratty moustache." He often puts on "jackets with large brightly coloured checks and he sported ties that were usually yellow or pale green" (Dahl, 2008: 17). As for Miss Trunchbull, she possesses no fine qualities of the head teachers. She has bull-neck, big shoulders, thick arms, sinewy wrists, and powerful legs. Being the most formidable female, it is believed that Miss Trunchbull can bend iron bars and tear telephone directories in half. Instead of speaking, she bellows. She does not walk, either, but marches. With such strength and

cruelty, her school children will be hit hard on the head with the platter, thrown out of the building windows, and locked up in a small thorny box called a Chokey if any school rules are violated. It can be said that learning how Miss Trunchbull has violently and mercilessly treated her school children, even someone who used to be indifferent to whatever matters to others or the children can tearfully cry or angrily be saddened.

Dangers or adverse situations also appear in the last chosen Dahlian story when Little Billy of *The Minpins* disobeys his mother's instruction and treads into The Forest of Sin. Soon after venturing into the woods, he has to run "faster than he had ever run in his life before" to escape from "a fearsome swooshing whooshing whiffling snorting noise that sounded as though some gigantic creature was breathing heavily through its nose as it galloped towards him" (Dahl, 2008: 11). Realizing that something tremendously dangerous is chasing him, the boy has to speed himself away from it like an arrow, jumps up to an enormous tree and meets Don Mini, the minpins' leader. After they have talked for a while, Little Billy is informed that the monster running after him is called the Red-Hot Smoke-Belching Gruncher.

Discussion and Conclusion

By and large, it has been widely known by parents and teachers that most overprotected or over-controlled children cannot deal with hardship and dangers bravely and effectively. Based on Jeffrey J. Wood's *Parental Intrusiveness and Children's Separation Anxiety in a Clinical Sample*, the parents' over-controlling actions will restrict a child's access to his/her environment or different challenging situations. Furthermore, the child who is always safeguarded from excessive threats by parents will not be able to cope with harms on his/her own. Consequently, the overprotected child will lack opportunities to develop competence and a sense of mastery especially when facing threatening conditions (2006: 73-87). In compliance with these notions, Roald Dahl has tried to construct his child protagonists as well as the child readers who can identify themselves with those Dahlian child protagonists to be different from generally over-controlled and overprotected children. Therefore, adversities have been abundantly seen in his

stories for the children: unattractive, brutal and mean, untypical relatives, parents or teachers; weird and perilous creatures; dangerous monsters; unconventional couples; outlandish and quirky events, etc.

In addition, the chosen Dahlian stories have been created in the second half of the twentieth century from 1964 to 1991. The period is dubbed postmodernism. In this era, according to many literary scholars, parent-child relationship became less significant. Tighter bond was given to peers and schools instead. Oftentimes, it was found that postmodern children could feel isolated and lonely for being left to spend time alone in front of television and computer. Moreover, they were encouraged to take the living burden as if they were the adults (Bubiková et al, 2008: 67). Besides, as advised in *Introducing Children's Literature: From Romanticism to Postmodernism*, children of this period should be exposed to reality (Thacker & Webb, 2002: 140).

With reference to postmodern ideologies, it can be inferred that the socio-economic and political contexts in the second half of the twentieth century do not allow the Dahlian child characters to just revel or indulge themselves in their childhood freely and enjoyably without learning to grow efficiently or without taking some responsibilities of their own lives. Contemplating the aforementioned social and economic factors, it is comprehensible why Dahl's children's stories have been employed by the author to warn his child readers that real life is not the bed of roses or like fairy tales which always end happily. For these reasons, adversities such as dangers, eccentricity, ugliness and other negativities have been added in the Dahlian writings for the children so as to familiarize his child readers with the truths of living.

In fact, Dahl's personal life is rather far from a fairy tale. Not the bed of roses but the thorny one defines his life. When attending schools, he was beaten and fagged unfairly by the bigger and older school boys and the teachers. Joining the army during World War II, he was hurt badly when his plane crashed. Far worse, after he got married to the successful American movie star Patricia Neal for a few years, their children died due to serious accident and sickness at their early ages. Misfortune did not cease to happen to Dahl's life, yet. Later on, his wife suffered from stroke and she could not fully recover without Dahl's Spartan healing assistance. Psychologically,

it is believed that a series of traumatic events in Dahl's personal life has tremendously affected his literary writings. As diagnosed by Zuzana Lacová, the unpleasant pictures consistently found intermingled in his children's stories have demonstrated Roald Dahl's non-solvable conflict situations, mental distress, commotions or injuries (2010: 17-20). That is to say, Dahl's psyche has been plagued by these bitter and painful experiences. Subsequently, these dystopian beliefs consciously and unconsciously stimulate him to consistently mingle the weird, unlikely, ugly, violent, morbid or unpleasant features in his children's stories.

Theoretically, people who used to be abused, ill-treated, or punished during their childhood like Roald Dahl are reported to be high-fantasy prone (Levin & Young, 2002: 203). This can be understandable since fantasizing or dreaming enables the abused and oppressed child to get away from the unhappy and miserable situations. Fantasies are subsequently the psychic retreats for Dahl. He revives his painful childhood memories and turns them into the creative fiction for the children. As Karen D'Angelo describes in *Webbing with Literature*, fantasy "twists or manipulates reality, often using fast action, humor, magic and imaginary events or characters (1995: 27). Fantasy is the perfect choice of literary genre that can help Roald Dahl be endowed fruitfully with his dream children's world, the world which the children can always win over the cruel adults.

According to David L. Russell's *Literature for Children: A Short Introduction*, the imaginary world of fantasy fiction always captures us; we are tremendously moved by "its underlying reality" (2005: 217). Hence, fantasy has been deeply rooted on universal truths and firmly founded on the basis of human nature despite the fact that it is created mainly from the author's imagination. Owing to these foundations, the impossible but complicated situations that seem unlikely to happen in real life have been artfully simplified to allow the readers to understand the other side of human actions and today's confusing society.

Indeed, Roald Dahl's children's fantasies contain all qualities of the good stories for the children. Based on *Taking the Second Step in Reading*, the books children read should "reinforce the traits they are developing which will help them cope with adult problems and become healthy,

successful adults (Stephens, 1989: 585 -586). Abiding by Bonnie Stephens' opinions on good books, Dahl's stories demonstrate how the children can handle with all living difficulties caused by the oppressive adult villains. In addition, when exploring Dahl's children's fantasies according to Megan A. Fitzgerald's viewpoints, we can also find out that helpful allies, magic or even paranormal power are always attainable for his child protagonists as soon as any crisis or fatal situations occur. With reference to her *Young Adult Fantasy Fiction in Recent Years: A Selective Annotated Bibliography*, Fitzgerald posits in this book that fantasy is the literary genre concerning "the struggle to overcome fear and evil. [This fantasy fiction] is about hope and empowerment of those to whom bad things happen" (2008: 9-10). From the researcher's thorough examination of Dahl's children's stories, it is discernible that either kind angels, helping mates, enchantment, or various unnatural and extraordinary abilities are usually handy to assist the lead Dahlian child characters to learn to solve their living crisis and problems. Although some critics or readers may accuse these stories of having unpleasant elements which are likely to provide negative effects on young readers, the researcher views that these elements are intentionally included to prepare this group of readers for adversities which might really come to their real life. Thus, reading Dahl's fantasy works for the children, it can be said that the child readers can be empowered tremendously by identifying themselves with the child protagonists. In spite of numerous impediments imposed on them by the bigger and more powerful adult enemies and other adverse incidents, they can survive, live on and thrive finally.

Recommendations

Dahl's children's stories are unique and unconventional. They embody controversies providing a lot of spaces which critics, scholars or even the readers can play, bargain, blame, question or admire. To examine the Dahlian works for the children, one particular approach or a combination of many approaches can be employed by researchers to study the Dahlian children's fiction. As the adverse features incorporated in his literary works for the children have been

investigated already, it is recommended that non-adverse themes should be explored to present an opposite view on the Dahlian children's stories.

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ผู้เขียน

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