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“The Tiniest Mite Packs the Mightiest Sting”
Interpretations of Feminism in the Works of Roald Dahl

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Abstract

In this thesis, three works by the beloved children’s author Roald Dahl will be discussed, namely *Matilda*, *The BFG*, and *The Witches*. To begin with, the adventurous life of Roald Dahl will be briefly looked at. As the primary goal of this thesis is to explore the feminist influence of the previously mentioned books, the historical background during the time of publication and feminist movement will be examined as well. In addition, the importance of good role models in literature will be explored, for in today’s imposing and fast-paced society it is vital for young girls to have strong role models to look up to. Each novel will be considered individually, and the focus will be on the female characters in the aforementioned books and the representation of femininity therein. The portrayal of different female characters will be examined in order to consider how it affects young readers’ concept of femininity. The characters in these novels vary from small but brave girls to frail women to monstrous and “masculine” women, and even to witches. Although the contrast between the characters is pronounced, each one is feminine in her own way. The adaptation of one of these works is also briefly looked at, to see if it furthers the feminist message of the story. As one character, Matilda, gets the worst treatment of all the protagonist, The Convention on the Rights of the Child is also briefly explained and how *Matilda* can be used to teach it to young children. Finally, the message of the books will be scrutinized to see if they have a feminist message to convey.
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1 Introduction

Literature is universal, and new books are being published all the time. Millions of books get published every year, with Iceland publishing the most titles per capita. Despite the endless stream of new and exciting books, old books that are considered classics are also being reprinted over and over again due to high demand. Classics are usually taught at schools, included in many “must-read” lists, and found in numerous households. These books are considered influential or essential works from certain time periods (Bates).

Children’s literature often gets forgotten when discussing literary classics, but countless children’s books are now considered classics. *The Jungle Book, Peter Pan, Gulliver’s Travels, Alice in Wonderland, The Secret Garden,* and the *Narnia Chronicles* are a few examples. Some of these classics books were written more than over a century ago, while others were written more recently. However, it is not only the age of books that makes them classics. They also have to be well-written and please adult readers as well as children, as many children’s books are read to children by adults. The book will do better and have higher sales number if they appeal to adults as well since grown-ups are the ones with the purchasing power. The books that are now considered classics have stood the test of time and are still relevant in today’s modern society. That being said, the capacity to deal with broader themes that readers can relate to is what modern and old classics have in common (Mangan).

The stories by Roald Dahl fall within this category. Roald Dahl is a celebrated children’s author. Many of his books are considered classics today, and their popularity seems to be constantly increasing. There are a number of different reasons for this, one being their relevance to modern society. The themes that Dahl deals with in his novels appeal to readers of all ages. This is evident when looking at Dahl’s work through the lens of feminist criticism. Dahl’s books can be viewed as having a feminist influence on young readers, as they contain strong female role models and other female characters with many distinctive traits.
2 Background

Roald Dahl is a celebrated English author. Every year, Roald Dahl Day is celebrated on the 18th of September, the day of Dahl’s birth. The writer was born in Llandaff, Wales in 1916. His parents were Norwegian, and Dahl was named after a Norwegian man who was the first man to reach the South Pole. After his father and older sister died in his early childhood, Dahl went away to boarding school. His experiences and memories from boarding school later became the inspiration for some of his works, such as Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and Boy. Dahl had an extraordinary life, which might explain his vivid imagination and his characters’ thirst for adventure. After finishing school, Dahl wanted to travel. He decided to go to Canada, and then he worked in East Africa until World War II. At only twenty-three years of age, he joined the Royal Air Force. He got injured in the war in a crash-landing, but that did not stop him. When Dahl had recovered from his injuries, he took part in The Battle of Athens and later became a spy and worked for the British secret intelligence service, MI6. Dahl married twice in his lifetime. The first time was in the year 1953 to Patricia Neal, who was an American actress. They had five children together. Later, Dahl married Felicity Crosland in 1983. Furthermore, Dahl was not only a fighter pilot and a spy but also an inventor. After his son, Theo, got a head injury, Dahl helped invent the Wade-Dahl-Till valve, in the hopes of helping his son and other children suffering from the same affliction. Despite all his achievements, Dahl is best known for his children’s books though he wrote other material such as screenplays for Chitty Chitty Bang Bang and the James Bond movie, You Only Die Twice, along with television shows, such as the Tales Of the Unexpected, which was a great success. Throughout his life, Dahl wrote and published over thirty titles, many of which are still extremely popular today.

In 1990, he died from cancer when he was seventy four years old. His legacy lives on as his works continue to amaze, excite, and inspire young readers (The Roald Dahl Story Company Limited). The Roald Dahl Museum and Story Center was opened in 2005 in Great Missenden (The Roald Dahl Story Company Limited). There is also Roald Dahl Plass in Cardiff which was renamed in 2000 to honour the Welsh author (Visit Cardiff). Dahl’s widow then furthered his legacy with the founding of the Roald Dahl’s Marvellous Children’s Charity in 1991. The charities mission is “that every seriously ill child has the best possible healthcare,” and until 2009, the charity also focused on helping to improve children’s literacy (The Roald Dahl Story Company Limited). In short, Roald Dahl lived
a truly remarkable life, and his legacy is exceptional as it continues to impact and change children’s lives.

2.1 Feminists on the Rise

In addition to being an extraordinary man, Roald Dahl also lived in remarkable times. He was born during World War I, lived through The Great Depression, fought in World War II, witnessed the Space Race, and was alive during one of the most significant social movements in history, feminism. Although feminism had a great impact on society, the term “feminism” was not well received by the public, and was often used as a pejorative term during the early stages of the movement. The term originated from the French word “féminisme” which was formed from the word “femme” with –isme added as it was used to refer to a social movement. For many years, many female social reformers rejected the term and refused to label themselves as feminists (Freedman).

Despite the term’s unpopularity in some circles, the political goals of the movement survived, and feminism continued with the word being constantly redefined in modern society. The term is more widely accepted today and can be defined as follows: “Feminism is a belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth. Because most societies privilege men as a group, social movements are necessary to achieve equality between women and men, with the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies” (Freedman 7). The first wave of feminism started in the late nineteenth century, with women forming a social movement and bursting onto the political scene, demanding more opportunities for themselves. They fought for social equality, a better education, and equal rights in the workplace. As the movement continued, their agenda also focused on political rights, such as the right for all women to vote, a time that is now known as women’s suffrage. The movement was a force to be reckoned with, and by the year 1928, women had the full right to vote (Dorey-Stein) (Rampton).

The second wave of feminism was in the later years of Dahl’s life during a time when he published many of his most beloved books (The Roald Dahl Story Company Limited). The second wave started in the 1960s and went on into the 1990s. Still dealing with the aftermath of World War II, the dominant issues were equality in the workplace and reproductive rights. Aside from the different issues that were being addressed, there was also a change in members: the first wave was mostly driven by white women who were from the middle class in Western societies, but the second wave included a more diverse group of women. The women fighting were now women of colour as well as ones.
from other classes, and from developing nations. This diverse group of women came
together, seeking solidarity (Rampton). During the second wave, many significant
milestones were reached in England, which changed the lives and futures of women. Birth
control was introduced in 1961, and in 1967, it became available for all women; abortions
were then legalised with the Abortion Act in the same year. Three years later, the Equal
Pay Act was passed, which involved the equal treatment of men and women in the
workplace. Other acts, such as The Sex Discrimination Act, which was passed in 1975,
and The Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act of 1985, had a major impact on the lives
of women and furthered the political agenda of the feminist movement (The National
Archives). In 1979, Margaret Thatcher became the first woman to hold the position of the
Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. For a long time, she was the only woman to have
had been Prime Minister until 2016 when Theresa May became Prime Minister
(Pallardy). Many influential female leaders emerged from the feminist movement. With
prominent and strong women such as Emmeline Pankhurst and Margaret Thatcher in the
spotlight and making a difference in the world, strong female characters became more
prominent in literature. Young girls now had women that they could look up to and role
models that they could aspire to be like.

2.2 “When I Grow Up I Want to be Like...”

Thatcher and Pankhurst are not the only historical female role models. There are plenty
of female role models in popular culture today, with the rise of feminism and movements
such as Me Too and other female empowerment efforts. We now have female
superheroes, singers, and athletes who are breaking records; scientists and politicians who
are making history; and many other women who are setting examples for younger girls.
Why, then, is there still need for role models for young girls? Alice Walker wrote about
the importance of role models, “The absence of models in literature, as in life, is an
occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behavior, in growth of
spirit and intellect, even if rejected, enrich and enlarge one’s view of existence” (Walker).

Girls today are under an enormous pressure to look a certain way and to be perfect. They feel the need to
fit unrealistic norms set by social media as well as by the film, fashion, and make-up industries that show this glamorous world with impossible standards of beauty. They grow up in a society that makes them feel like something is wrong with them if they deviate from such unattainable ideals. That is why it is important for girls to have women to look up to that do not uphold a false image of perfection, but
ones that show them that they can do anything they set their minds to. These standards and false images are affecting girls’ self-esteem to such extremes that they develop life-threatening conditions such as anorexia and bulimia. Girls often get the message from media that looks are the only thing that matters in a woman, and this idea is perfectly summed up in a conversation between Mrs Wormwood and Miss Honey in *Matilda*. Mrs Wormwood says, “A girl should think about making herself look attractive so she can get a good husband later on. Looks is more important than books, Miss Hunky…” ‘The name is Honey,’ Miss Honey said. ‘Now look at me,’ Mrs. Wormwood said. ‘Then look at you. You chose books. I chose looks’” (Dahl, *Matilda* 91). Mrs. Wormwood conforms to societal norms of thinking that looks are all that matter in a girl.

*Matilda, The BFG, and The Witches* were all published during a critical period in feminist history, which is reflected in the protagonists and all the different portrayals of femininity in these stories. Literature has a great effect on children, as it affects their imagination and their ideas of the real world. Therefore, it is crucial that girls are empowered and taught that they can do anything they set their mind to, regardless of looks. When talking about role models, the question comes up of what constitutes a good female role model. The topic of female role models in literature has been a popular one for many years. In 1999, it was explored by a group of teachers, professors, and media specialists. The group looked at children’s books in search of a positive role model for girls and tried to define what counted as a role model. Through their research, they ended up developing an evaluation chart. With the evaluation they could define what being a role model means and look more closely at the characters’ abilities, problem-solving methods, relationships, issues, and other personal characteristics. They selected six characteristics that should be considered when examining if a character is a positive gender role model. Such as, what issues are important to the character and if the character departs from traditional stereotypes. (Pat Heine).

In media and literature, there are now countless influential female role models as popular culture is saturated with the new wave of feminism. It is wonderful that the importance of varied female representation is being recognised by book publishers and society as a whole. This diverse representation matters as it can be validating for young girls to have someone they relate to or aspire to be like.
3 Matilda

Matilda was published in 1988, and it is the last children’s book that Dahl wrote before he died but is also one of the most famous. The story is about a little girl named Matilda. Matilda is extremely intelligent, loves reading books, has a good heart, and a strong sense of right and wrong. She does not fit in with the rest of her family who only think about money, looks, and watching television. They neglect Matilda and mistreat her. At school, Matilda faces another unjust adult, Miss Trunchbull, yet she also befriends her teacher, Miss Honey, who was also raised in an abusive environment. Miss Honey is amazed at Matilda’s cleverness, and the two become very close. Matilda decides that she and her friends at school do not deserve to be treated this badly and takes matters into her own hands. Matilda is no ordinary five year old: not only is she very smart, but she also has telekinetic powers that help her bring adults who were unfair to her to justice. In the end, Matilda gets her revenge on her parents and Miss Trunchbull, avenging Miss Honey as well. Matilda ends up living with Miss Honey “and as bad as things were before, that’s how good they became” (Devito), giving Matilda the happy ending she deserves (Dahl, Matilda).

The book won the Children’s Book Award the same year it was published and was well received upon its publication. Since then, it has been translated in over more than forty languages. Matilda is still tremendously popular as it continues to entertain and amaze readers of all ages (The Roald Dahl Story Company Limited). It has also been adapted into a movie and a hugely successful musical. As this thesis is being written, the musical is in production in Borgarleikhúsið in Reykjavík and is highly anticipated. Last year was the 30th anniversary of the publication of the book. In honour of the anniversary, special editions were published. The books had four different covers, each with a new illustration by Quentin Blake, showing different versions of what Matilda would be doing as an adult. Two showed her as chief executive of the British Library, one showed her as a world traveller, and the last showed her as being an astrophysicist. As Matilda is a very popular book, it has often been reviewed and discussed. The book has been praised for being a good story for young readers and for having a feminist influence on them. Paradoxically, the story has also been criticised for its problematic and lousy portrayal of women and for not actually being a feminist influence at all. The book has many contrasting female characters that all portray different feminine qualities. By taking a
closer look at the characters, the argument that the book negatively depicts women can be challenged and hopefully rendered invalid.

3.1 The Different Characters

Matilda is the protagonist of the story. She is only five years old but is wise beyond her years. Poorly treated by her parents, who almost completely ignore her, she does not let this unfair treatment stop her. She is a bookworm and reads everything she can get her hands on. The stories she reads about heroes and their triumphs over evil inspire her and fill her with courage. She uses her telekinetic powers to stand up to the adults that have been unfair to her. Matilda can be considered as a good role model for young girls as she shows them that book-loving, smart girls can save the day and that girls can be heroes. Even though Matilda does have telekinetic powers that help her, she uses her intelligence, bravery, and strong moral compass to solve her problems. Matilda is honest and has a keen sense of right and wrong. Instead of being silent and obedient, she takes action. She is brave, and she defies the idea that girls are unadventurous and that unlike boys, they are not capable of being a little bit naughty and making mischief. She uses her age to her advantage and acts innocent, and because of her gender, no one suspects her. Matilda knows that because she is a little girl, she gets away with all her pranks. Matilda is kindhearted, and the readers know that she is not playing tricks on her parents and Miss Trunchbull to be mean; rather, she is tricking them because they misbehaved as adults and therefore have to be taught a lesson. It is all those good qualities that make Matilda an endearing character and someone that younger readers can look up to. Despite her young age, Matilda is a hero and a little feminist influencer in her own right (The Roald Dahl Story Company Limited).

Indeed, Matilda is not the only female character in the book and not even the only one that girls can look up to. Miss Jennifer Honey is Matilda’s teacher and friend. She is astounded by her pupil’s intellect and telekinetic capabilities. Miss Honey is one of the first grown-ups who treats Matilda well and who appreciates how unique she is and encourages her. In the story, she is described as being frail, beautiful, and almost porcelain-like: she “had a lovely oval madonna face with blue eyes and her hair was light brown. Her body was so slim and fragile one got the feeling that if she fell over, she would smash into a thousand pieces, like a porcelain figure.” (Dahl, Matilda 60). Of the female characters in the story, Miss Honey is the one who most resembles the ideal beautiful woman according to society’s expectations of how women should look. Even though she
happens to fit conventional standards of beauty, there are other aspects of her character that break away from the traditional expectations of women. Aside from being beautiful, her kind nature also emphasises her femininity and difference from the other adult female characters. She is the ideal teacher in the story: “Miss Jennifer Honey was a mild and quiet person who never raised her voice and was seldom seen to smile, but there is no doubt that she possessed that rare gift for being adored by every small child under her care” (Dahl, Matilda 60-61). Miss Honey is not only Matilda’s friend, but also the first to be gentle and fair to her. Even though Miss Honey is sweet and kind and looks like she has a perfect life, like Matilda, she also had a difficult childhood and carries the weight of that dark secret around with her. Miss Honey is an essential character in the story, not only as Matilda’s teacher, but as a loving and motherly figure in Matilda’s life. She has many feminine qualities, but she can also be seen as breaking away from the tradition, as she is a single woman with no love interest in the story. Much like Matilda, Miss Honey can be seen as a strong role model and a feminist influence for her compassion, her spirit, and her determination to not let her past hold her back (The Roald Dahl Story Company Limited).

Though Miss Honey serves as the mother figure in the story, Matilda does have a mother, Mrs.Wormwood. She is almost the complete opposite of Miss Honey. Mrs.Wormwood is a bad mother to Matilda as she is neither loving nor caring. She cares more about her looks and having fun playing bingo or watching television than she does about raising her child. She does not even notice how extraordinary her daughter is. Mrs.Wormwood might be considered to be unfeminine because of her looks or her lack of motherly affection or tenderness: “Miss Honey looked at the plain and plump person with the smug suet-pudding face who was sitting across the room” (Dahl, Matilda 92). What makes Mrs.Wormwood stereotypically feminine is her vanity and obsession with her looks. Consequently, while she is stripped of some traditional feminine qualities, she is also endowed with other typical negative feminine attributes. Surely she is superficial, but she also reflects the all-too-common way of thinking about women and how women are perceived in society. In her opinion, looks are much more important than books, as she says herself: “A girl should think about making herself attractive so she can get a good husband later on. Looks is more important than books” (Dahl, Matilda 91). Mrs.Wormwood is obnoxious and rude, and she serves as a foil to the supporting character of Miss Honey (The Roald Dahl Story Company Limited). Although Mrs.Wormwood might not be a good role model, she does not undermine the feminist
influence of the story. She is merely a different kind of female, showing girls that there is more than one type of woman.

This is also the case with the villain of the story, Miss Trunchbull. The character of Miss Trunchbull is where many consider Dahl to fail in his otherwise great feminist tale. Miss Trunchbull is the headmistress of Matilda’s school, Crunchem Hall, but she hates children. In her eyes, children are maggots, scum; they are revolting and should hurry up and become adults. Miss Trunchbull is big, muscular, almost animal-like; in short, she is a terrifying woman. Dahl describes her in the book as “a gigantic holy terror, a fierce tyrannical monster who frightened the life out of pupils and teachers alike” (Dahl, Matilda 61). She is violent, temperamental, and as a former famous athlete, tremendously strong. Dahl’s description of Miss Trunchbull as a “formidable female” (Dahl, Matilda 76), can be seen as a failure in an otherwise great feminist story. Her choice of not conforming to traditional gender roles of society as well as her strength and masculinity are attributes that are supposed to make her repulsive. However, this argument can be viewed from a different angle. Her masculine traits strengthen the feminist influence of the story. Just like Mrs Wormwood, Miss Trunchbull’s looks and traits are there to emphasise that women are all different, and just because she is not skinny and beautiful, or loving and smart, that does not make her any less of a woman. It is not her masculinity or her looks that make Miss Trunchbull the villain; rather, it is her treatment of her pupils. She swings them around by their pigtails, throws them across playgrounds, and force-feeds them an entire cake as a punishment. Her actions are so outrageous that no adult would ever believe a child when she would try to tell her parents what the headmistress does to her pupils (The Roald Dahl Story Company Limited). As Matilda says, “no parent is going to believe this pigtail story, not in a million years.” (Dahl, Matilda 111). In short, although the character of Miss Trunchbull is masculine, both when it comes to her looks and traits, that does not undermine the feminist message of the book. However, the portrayal of Miss Trunchbull is still a topic of some controversy, especially in the highly praised musical adaptation of Matilda, where a man plays the character of Miss Trunchbull.

3.2 Influence of Adaptations

Matilda is a very popular story by Roald Dahl, and adaptations of the story have only increased its popularity. The book was first adapted to the screen in 1996 and directed by the American actor, Danny Devito. Today, the movie has become a cult classic and remains a top-rated children’s movie. The actress who played Matilda, Mara Wilson, is
best known for her portrayal of the magical bookworm despite starring in a number of movies.

When the popularity of *Matilda* seemed to be dwindling, it was given a new life in 2010. A musical adaptation of *Matilda* by The Royal Shakespeare Company opened in The Courtyard Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. The musical was written by Dennis Kelly accompanied by music and lyrics written by comedian and composer, Tim Minchin. The musical was very well received by critics and audience alike, getting numerous five-star reviews and winning many prizes, including seven Olivier Awards. Because of its success, the musical premiered on Broadway in 2013, where it won four Tony Awards (Matilda The Musical).

The musical adaptation not only breathed a new life into the already popular children’s classic but also furthers the story’s feminist message. Tim Minchin brilliantly catches the message of the book and interprets it in a comical way through his lyrics. As Minchin says, “stories are best when they are a bit like rollercoasters, with highs and lows, twist and turns, a good bit of fear and the significant risk that someone might vomit...Songs allow us to make those highs soar even higher and those lows seem even darker...” (Matilda The Musical 16). Though female empowerment might not be the main focus or message of the musical, it can be seen in some of the songs such as *When I Grow Up* and *Naughty*. When taking a closer look at the lyrics of the song *Naughty*, they have an empowering message, “just because you find that life’s not fair it doesn’t mean that you just have to grin and bear it. If you always take it on the chin and wear it nothing will change” (Minchin). The lyrics also emphasise the idea of a scary adult against a small child, “even if you’re little you can do a lot you mustn't let a little thing like little stop you...” (Minchin). The message of female empowerment might be most evident in the last lines of the song, “but nobody else is gonna put it right for me, nobody but me is gonna change my story, sometimes you have to be a little bit naughty” (Minchin). As the young actress who plays Matilda belts out those lines, she empowers other, telling them that they can do anything that they set their minds to, even teaching their parents and evil head mistress a lesson. It is that message that makes the story and, by extension, the musical relevant in today’s feminist society.

English actor Bertie Carvel portrays the role of Miss Trunchbull when the musical premiered in London and again when it was put up on Broadway. Carvel was praised for his portrayal, won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Actor in a Musical, and was even nominated for a Tony. However, many critics and theatre audience questioned the
decision of having a man portray Miss Trunchbull. Clearly, a lot can change from book to stage, and Miss Trunchbull was not the only character to be transformed in the musical and film adaptation of Matilda. Certainly, it can be difficult to stay completely faithful to character descriptions, but in some cases, characters are changed for other reasons. Adaptational attractiveness is an unofficial term for a widespread practice in the entertainment business, where a character changes significantly to look more attractive to gain more viewers. Such is the case for a few characters in Matilda, most notably Mrs.Wormwood, in both the 1996 movie adaptation and musical production. As mentioned before, Mrs Wormwood is a plump woman and the drawing by Quentin Blake shows her to be a big woman as well (Dahl, Matilda). In the 1996 movie, Mrs.Wormwood is played by Rita Perlman. She is skinny and tall and does not look like the description of her character at all. Her personality traits are the same though, and she is still very neglectful of Matilda, is obsessed with looks, and only want to play Bingo and watch television (Devito). Her portrayal changes even more in the musical production. She is originally played by Josie Walker, an even more attractive version of Mrs.Wormwood (Matilda The Musical). Instead of playing Bingo, she is obsessed with dancing and dresses like a dancer, in sparkly dresses with flashy jewellery and hair decorations. Only her neglect and obnoxiousness remain in the stage portrayal.

Ultimately, by taking a closer look at the story, particularly its various female characters and adaptations, Matilda has an unmistakable feminist message for its readers. It has a strong female lead, and Matilda overcomes all the obstacles in her life using her smarts, morality, and powers. It is vital for young girls to have someone like Matilda to show them that girls can be daring, clever, and adventurous. Then, there are other female characters, which all have different attributes and show that there is no right way to be a woman. Women can be big and small, sweet or scary, loving or evil, and have many other traits. The story has an empowering message, and its protagonist is a great role model, not only for girls but for all children.

3.3 The Convention on the Rights of the Child

Aside from being an entertaining and funny story, one with a good role model and feminist influence, Matilda is also used in schools for teaching children about The Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a treaty created to protect the fundamental rights of all children. According to the treaty, a
child is any person under the age of eighteen. It focuses around four primary principles as Diane Whitehead sums it up in her article about the treaty: “the right to survival; the right to develop to the fullest; the right to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and the right to participate fully in family, cultural and social life” (Whitehead). The treaty can be a big and complicated concept for children to comprehend; therefore, Matilda has been used to teach it to children. Matilda’s parents break the treaty by constantly violating her rights, as they neglect her, and by not allowing her to go to school, not cooking dinner for her, and leaving her home alone for an extended period. Miss Trunchbull also breaks the treaty with the horrible treatment of her pupils. With the help of Matilda, children can be taught about their rights in a more engaging and entertaining way, as it is only a story as opposed to a story based on real events. It is essential to teach children about their rights and the convention, as it is easier for people to claim their rights when they know about them. By protecting the rights of children with the principles of the treaty, there might soon be a world where every child has the opportunity to live a safe life, develop fully, and to receive a quality education (Whitehead).

4 The BFG

Another great story with an empowering young girl as the main character is The BFG, which stands for Big Friendly Giant. The BFG is about a little orphaned girl named Sophie. Late one night, during the witching hour, Sophie gets kidnapped by a big scary giant who takes her out of her bed to Giant Country. As Sophie comes to find out, the giant is not scary at all, but a nice giant that catches dreams and blows them into children's rooms at night. Sophie and the BFG, as she calls him, become good friends, but Sophie is not safe in Giant Country as there are other giants there who eat children. As the child-eating giants continue to terrorise England and eat children, Sophie and the BFG decide that they must be stopped. With the help of no other than the Queen of England, they catch the giants and send them off to a place where they cannot cause any trouble or eat more children (Dahl, The BFG).

The BFG was published in 1982 and has remained as one of Dahl’s more popular stories as the BFG is a beloved character. The BFG is not the first time the audience meets BFG himself as he was also a character in a bedtime story in Danny, the Champion of the World. Dahl even once said that of all his stories The BFG was one of his favourites.
Another thing that makes this book special is that it is dedicated to Dahl’s daughter, Olivia, who tragically passed away from measles in 1961, when she was only seven years of age. The book won The Federation of Children’s Book Groups Award the same year it was published. It has been adapted twice into a film, first in 1989 as an animated movie and then, in 2016, as a live action movie directed by Steven Spielberg. Unlike *Matilda*, *The BFG* has only two prominent female characters, Sophie, the protagonist, and The Queen of England (*The Roald Dahl Story Company Limited*).

### 4.1 Sophie and the Queen of England

Sophie is a very bright, kind, and polite little eight-year-old. Moreover, she is also exceptionally brave and resourceful. At first, she is scared when the BFG is kidnapping her, but after getting to know him, she finds out that he is sweet and just as lonely as she is. Sophie has a good heart, and instead of resenting the BFG for taking her and keeping her in Giant Country, she makes the best of it as her adventurous nature finds it a little exciting. Later in the story, Sophie can be seen almost as a motherly figure to the BFG as she looks after him, teaches him proper English, and helps him to learn about human culture (Berg). When Sophie discovers that the other giants are eating children, she comes up with a genius plan on how to get rid of them once and for all. Sophie has many feminine qualities, such as her politeness and kindness, yet she is an action hero as well, which makes her a progressive character for her time.

*The BFG* does have far fewer female characters than male ones. Aside from Sophie, The Queen of England is the only other prominent female character in the story. The Queen does not appear until near the end of the story, but she plays an important part in the outcome. She is very wise, determined, and tactful woman with much power. As a Queen, she is a leader, and her leadership skills become apparent when she calls The Head of the Air Force and The Head of the Army and commands them to help Sophie and The BFG. Throughout the whole proceedings of the morning when she meets Sophie and BFG, she is composed and manages to contain her emotions in this surreal situation. Like Sophie, the Queen displays motherly features, as she worries about the children of England and welcomes Sophie, making her and the BFG feel safe. The Queen is a minor character but still manages to further the feminist message of the story, for she is a woman in a leadership position and she is the one that Sophie and the BFG go to for help. It is not a man that saves the day, but a little girl with the help of another powerful and strong woman (Berg) (*The Roald Dahl Story Company Limited*).
4.2 Sophie and Matilda’s message

The *BFG* certainly has a feminist message for its readers. It has a strong female protagonist that is also a good role model. That protagonist ends up saving the day and the lives of millions of children, with the help of another admirable and empowering female character. The story also conveys the message that girls should not be afraid to dream big. Dreams are an important plot device in the story. The BFG catches dreams in Dream Country, which fascinates Sophie, and together they make a dream, or in this case, a nightmare for the Queen so she will believe them when they tell her about the giants. In her wildest dream, Sophie would never have imagined that she would befriend a giant, meet the Queen, and save lives. As she says herself, “She found it almost impossible that she, Sophie, a little orphan of no real importance in the world, was at this moment actually sitting high above the ground on the window-sill of the Queen of England’s bedroom, with the Queen herself asleep in there behind a curtain not more than five yards away. The very idea of it was absurd.” (Dahl, *The BFG* 139).

Being written six years apart, *Matilda* and *The BFG* are similar in many ways. The characters, Matilda and Sophie, have a lot in common. They are both very clever and kind little girls. They have many more admirable qualities which make them both excellent role models for other girls. In their stories, they both have a friend in need, whom they save. Unlike Matilda, Sophie does not have any supernatural powers. She shows readers that intelligence and bravery can also be special powers. Essentially, the stories share the same message: little girls can be heroes and save the day, with or without superpowers. Furthermore, the main characters of both stories defy the traditional gender stereotypes of their time. According to Matilda’s parents, “small girls should be seen and not heard” (Dahl, *Matilda* 7), but Matilda and Sophie make themselves seen and heard, and they show girls that there is nothing that they cannot do. There is no knight in shining armour that comes and saves the day, as in fairytales where it is usually the man that has to save the damsel in distress. Instead, Dahl gives the classic fairytale ending a modern twist; in both stories, Matilda and Sophie are the heroines, saving Miss Honey and BFG respectively (Berg). More importantly, Dahl never crosses the line of saying that girls are, in some way, better than boys or vice versa. For example, in *The BFG*, Sophie and the BFG become friends and just because the BFG speaks a little differently, Sophie never thinks that she is above him, and likewise, the BFG does not think any less of Sophie just because she is much smaller than him. The stories are not about girls versus boys, but
children versus adults or giants. As the feminist movement strives for equality, not superiority, *The BFG* clearly has a feminist message.

5 The Witches

While *The BFG* has only two female characters, *The Witches* has plenty. *The Witches* was published in 1983. The story is about an orphaned boy who goes and lives with his grandmother in Norway after his parents pass away. Through his grandmother’s stories, he learns all about witches that live among people. On holiday in England, the boy and his grandmother discover that there are witches staying in their hotel, and that these creatures have a diabolical scheme to get rid of all children in England. They plan to turn all children into mice, and then the grown-ups will kill the mice, not knowing that they are, in fact, children. The boy and his grandma have to put an end to this horrible plan. In the end, they manage to defeat the witches and give them a taste of their own medicine, literally (Dahl, *The Witches*).

The book was well received when it was initially published and won three awards in that year. As a young boy, Dahl spent many summer holidays in Norway, much like the boy in the story, where he was told stories of magic and witches. The story is also special for two other reasons, as Dahl dedicated the book to Liccy, his wife, and the character of the grandmother is said to be partially inspired by his own Norwegian mother (*The Roald Dahl Story Company Limited*). Due to its content, which involves witches and killing children, it is often listed as being amongst the scariest children’s books, but with his brilliant writing, Dahl makes readers laugh at such scary and dark subjects.

5.1 “All witches are women”

When the book was initially published, it received mixed reviews due to it is violent nature. The book is still considered to be controversial, not only for the violence in it but for its alleged misogyny (Bird). At the beginning of the book, the narrator explains that “All witches are women” (Dahl, *The Witches* 3). The Witches wear disguises, so they can hide in plain sight. When the witches are disguised, they look pretty, are charming, and seem like normal women, but once they have taken their masks off, they are extremely horrifying. They have no toes; their spit is blue; and they have bald heads and brown claws (Dahl, *The Witches*). Because they look like regular women with their masks on, it puts every woman under suspicion. The idea that women might be witches can be seen
as historical rather than misogynistic. Throughout history, innocent women were accused of being witches and were persecuted and even killed for it. The narrator goes on to say that witches can only be women, though he also says, “I do not wish to speak badly about women. Most women are lovely” (Dahl, The Witches 3). Furthermore, his grandma explains that “Witches are not actually women at all...they are totally different animals” (Dahl, The Witches 24), which shows that Dahl is clearly not trying to demonize all women.

Another example of the author’s alleged misogyny is linking the High Witch with serpent images and, by extension, connecting her to the devil. In literature, the serpent image is often used as a symbol for seduction, evil, and the fall of humanity (Bird). However, although Dahl´s text might look like it demonizes womankind, in fact, it challenges gender stereotypes and exposes the inequitable divide of power. Referring back to chapter 3, society appears to demand and expect women to behave in a certain manner. Women are supposed to be beautiful, kind, and motherly. Both the grandma and the witches do not fill these expectations but are still successful, for the most part. Similar to the other books, the battle in this novel is between a child against one or more a scary adult figures. In The Witches, there is a clear symbol of weak against strong. The witches’ plan is to turn all children into mice, and the boy protagonist ends up as a mouse, an animal that is considered to be weak and small. Still, as a mouse, the boy defeats the witches. As Anne-Marie Bird rightfully points out in her work on women in The Witches, “The issue of female subjectivity is not raised in Dahl's text; evil is not gender specific but is located within the ‘all-powerful’ threatening adult figure” (Bird 121). This is a common theme in Dahl’s books and can be seen in Matilda and The BFG as well. Even though the villain is female, it does not make the story contain any less of a feminist message for the readers, as a woman can be just as evil as any man.

5.2 Feminist influence

Even though The Witches does not have a strong and clever young girl as the protagonist, it does not mean that the book does not have a feminist influence on its readers. The main female characters in the book are the protagonist's grandmother and the High Witch. They are two completely different women, though they are both powerful in their own way. Each character portrays certain feminine qualities but is also stripped of other general feminine attributes. The grandma is neither young or beautiful, as described in the book and drawn by Quentin Blake; she is a fat and off-putting woman who sits in her chair
smoking cigars. However, she is kind, caring, and intelligent. Meanwhile, the High Witch is the exact opposite. When disguised, she looks beautiful and much younger than she really is. However, underneath her mask, she is a repulsive, wicked, child-hating murderer. The High Witch can be seen as the queen of witches; she has immense powers and leads the rest of the witches. Dahl not only shows that the most unlikely women can be heroes, but that they can also be the villains. In *The Witches*, the villain is a woman, just like in *Matilda*, though these two women are completely different. Aside from hating children, the High Witch and Miss Trunchbull have little else in common with each other. Even though the witches are the villains in the story, and as such they might not be the most likely candidates to promote feminism, they are powerful women in their own right. Moreover, they have a plan to get rid of all children in England, but they can only achieve that by working together. Previously, they had slowly gotten rid of children one by one, but they hope to get rid of all of them simultaneously. These monstrous women are empowering as they show that women can have power, which they can put to good or bad use and that women together can do even more. Though, fortunately, the witches do not succeed in their sinister goal, there are other examples throughout history that show that when women come together, they are even more powerful.

Dahl also uses the character of grandma to demonstrate that women can do anything they want, regardless of looks or age. Although the grandmother is at a disadvantage compared to the witches as they have magic, are numerous, and have good looks, none of that matters as it is personality that truly counts in the story. Despite her shortcomings, the grandma brilliantly helps her grandson to outsmart the witches and defeat them.

With all this in mind, *The Witches* can be seen as having a feminist influence on young readers. There are different depictions of strong women in the book, and moreover, like *Matilda* and *The BFG*, it passes the Bechdel test. The test is a measure of how women are represented in fiction, especially films, and is used to point out gender inequality in such works. To pass the test, the work has to have at least two women that are named and that they have a conversation about something other than men.
6 Conclusion

To summarise, Dahl is a fantastic author, and many of his books have now become classics. He had an extraordinary life, which might be a reflection of the times he lived in. He was alive during a period of substantial social change as the feminist movement was on the rise and made its mark on history. Incidentally, it is not surprising that many of Dahl’s books have female characters of all sorts, from empowering little girls to scary witches and a cunning grandmother to a monstrous headmistress and a neglectful mother. Some of the characters can serve as role models, which is vital for girls in today’s society. Others show that women come in all shape and sizes, that they can be evil or good, feminine or masculine and anything in between. From those characters, girls can see that there is no mold that they have to fit; instead, they can be who and what they want to be (though hopefully not child-hating principals). In fact, there are many more feminist lessons that can be drawn from Dahls’ stories: women can be heroes or villains, and they can even have more than one role. Expectations of women are often superficial, but gender stereotypes, which are a product of society, should not define young girls or women. Women are often overlooked, especially little girls, but their voices are powerful; they matter and are just as important as grown-ups. Finally, Dahl’s stories tell readers that everybody has a chance. Gender and age do not matter; with a dash of courage, everybody can find their place in the world. Given these points, *Matilda, The BFG, and The Witches* all have a feminist message to convey to their readers. Their popularity does not seem to be diminishing anytime soon, and with these works being constantly adapted into plays and films, they continue to be relevant in modern society and to entertain each new generation.
Works Cited


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