

Research Essay

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Matilda: Powerlessness and The Pursuit of Justice

In the world of children's literature, novels serve as more than simply entertainment, they act as means for imparting valuable life lessons and moral principles to child readers. By analyzing the book *Matilda* by Roald Dahl, I seek to validate the idea that by infusing children's novels with elements of humour and satire, authors subtly educate and make young readers aware of the complexities of the world around them. Since child readers are in the stage of their lives when everything they read or see has a huge influence on them, I would like to present a firm stance that novels like *Matilda* prepare children for potential challenges they may encounter in the future such as the egoistic, selfish and cruel nature of humanity through a lightened lens of childhood. Through this essay, I would like to stress that *Matilda* encourages a broader understanding of human nature and unfair experiences, specifically crafted for child readers to absorb through simultaneously adding a variety of different humorous and hopeful situations.

For child readers, Matilda's eventual freedom and victory over her parents and Miss Trunchbull's abuse is a satisfying alteration of the usual power and legacy system—and for older readers, the novel is a subtle warning not to abuse their power over younger people. The book shows how such behaviour can result in creative and productive forms of destruction by those it is inflicted on, like Matilda's pranks and her extreme amusement when successfully tricking her parents and the elders like Miss Trunchbull, who she thinks deserved to be punished. This can be considered subversive as it challenges the standard power dynamic by giving children the upper hand over elders, through their disruptive and harmless chaos, that leads to impartial consequences for cruel people.

As presented in a book published by J. Of College Of Education For Women, "Dahl does not hesitate to indulge the dark side of people, but he also infuses this darkness with humour, that is also black humour. What initially seems like an unusual, even unconventional combination is what characterizes Dahl's stories and is perhaps the secret behind the appeal of his stories. Humour is not used for its original purpose; to instigate laughter and entertain people. Rather humour is intermingled with dark themes, grotesqueness, and violence in a mix that creates a contradictory and bizarre world that draws the reader in."

These dark and tragic themes of bullying and mistreatment in *Matilda* are coated with simple childish language and a lightened perspective, which divert the child's attention from the darker aspects behind the character's personalities, providing them comfort through Matilda's creative, kind, bold and resilient mind. However, Matilda, for all her brilliance, is presented as a helpless kid unable to do anything about her situation. Her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood, treat her like an inconvenience, like a "scab" that they can't wait to get rid of, and fail to respect her extraordinary intellectual ability.

From the beginning of the story, while we see instances like the father's insulting and degrading language, throwing words like "twit", "stupid" and "squirt" at his own daughter and the mother's

silencing of the daughter's opinions by phrases like "keep your nasty mouth shut," (Mr. Wormwood the Great Car Dealer 5), at the same time, we see Matilda's relationship with Mrs Phelps develop into a nurturing bond that provides her with the means to pursue her passion of reading that her parents are unwilling to grant her with. This helps her escape to new worlds and indulge in thrilling adventures like "olden-day sailing ships with Joseph Conrad" or "Africa with Ernest Hemingway" (The Reader of Books 12) to escape her feelings of neglect and hurt by her parents' attitude towards her. She finds solace and peace in quiet environments, like the comfort of her room, along with a hot chocolate drink and a book to keep her engaged.

The book gives glimpses of the family's demeaning actions and words towards Matilda and an expansion on the feelings such actions illicit, like the anger Matilda feels that makes her want to extract a sort of revenge from her parents in some way, which on a positive note, she uses to fuel her creativity and imagination. The narrator frequently points out that Matilda, being only five years old, must obey her parents' demands, no matter how absurd or incorrect they may be, like her father's insistence on the family eating in front of the television together, which made him top on Matilda's list of people to have a small victory over.

Given the lack of affectionate ties with her family, Matilda uses pranks to create chaos and disorder and feel empowered, like applying superglue on the hat that her father wears, leaving a bald white ring around his head. This, on a psychological note, signals a plea for her parents to understand that she is suffering and feels unloved. These pranks serve dual purposes for Matilda: they are a desperate bid for recognition and attention, and they help her maintain the confidence which would help her "tolerate their idiocies and would stop her from going crazy." (Mr Wormwood the Great Car Dealer 8)

This can relate to the child reader who feels misunderstood in their own home and provides a safe haven for them to comfort themselves through an empowering and rebellious child protagonist, challenging power dynamics between elders and children. It also further encourages the reader to contemplate on their melancholic feelings of grief, rage, and so forth, and to then use those emotions to drive them towards productive and perhaps, a little destructive yet harmless, endeavours, to get back to those who use their dominance to belittle others.

Moreover, on a philosophical note, Matilda's character comes off as a realist in regard to her ways of coping with all the cruelty she faces, supported by this excerpt, "She seemed to know that neither crying nor sulking ever got anyone anywhere. The only sensible thing to do when you are attacked is, as Napoleon once said, to counter-attack. Matilda's wonderfully subtle mind was already at work devising yet another suitable punishment for the poisonous parent." (The Ghost 4) This subconsciously instils a fighting spirit in the minds of children to stand up for what they believe in and not take wicked conduct by others personally to their heart.

The talking parrot prank on her family, which made them fear that the house was haunted, was also another form of entertainment and achievement for Matilda, as we see the absurd way in which the father gets too scared and the mother starts screaming, both being dramatic and unpractical in their responses. This reaction provides Matilda with enough validation of her intellect and cleverness, strengthening her individual identity against the parents' depreciating remarks.

As a scholarly article by Madeline Spivey concurs, "In making the gap between Matilda and her family extreme, Dahl represents the child's view of the situation. For Matilda and other children, it can seem like the whole world is against them. Dahl validates this sentiment in the way he chooses to describe Matilda's family." By incorporating Black humour, that is the smooth integration of tragic

themes into a text through the use of humour, *Matilda*, in this regard, portrays a lightened take on the themes of grief and rage that childhood neglect and verbal abuse can cause on a little child.

Additionally, the novel also conveys that even when parents are good and kind, they can't always protect kids as much as kids might need. For example, Matilda realizes that no sensible parent is going to believe a child who says that the Headmistress of their school is swinging kids around by their braids and throwing them into fields. Miss Trunchbull's behavior is too outrageous to be believed. This creates a situation where even supportive parents can't completely shelter their children, which might trigger adult or parent readers, but for the child reader who has not yet matured enough for comprehending the extremity of these darker themes, it will be a fresh, empowering and contradicting perspective of their position as children in a strict and controlling environment.

Witnessing instances of intertextuality in *Matilda*, this admission in a research article by Åse Kristine Tveit puts it accurately, "Considering how strongly Dickens' *Great Expectations* appeals to *Matilda*, it is tempting to combine the context of her own life with the story of the novel. *Great Expectations* is known as a dramatic, sentimental, and entertaining story of the life from boyhood to adulthood of an orphan, who has to struggle his way through life, seriously bullied by those who control him."

Matilda's lack of power and control over her life continues at Crunchem Hall Primary School, where the principal Miss Trunchbull forces strict rules. She doesn't put up with jokes, criticism, or any kind of behaviour that she finds improper, including boys with long hair or girls wearing pigtails. Miss Trunchbull has harsh punishments for children who cross her, including flinging them by their pigtails and confining them in the "Chokey," a tiny, dangerous cupboard. She exercises her power over the children by using harsh and frequently absurd methods, leaving them with no choice but to follow through with her commands.

Simultaneously, the author introduces the character of Miss Honey, who serves as a contrasting beacon of hope and healing for Matilda, as she constantly pleads to the headmistress and her parents regarding the child's extraordinary abilities. She is portrayed as a reserved, slight, and gentle teacher who slowly asserts her independence, as shown by her willingness to reside in a modest cottage to distance herself from the vicious influence of Miss Trunchbull, her aunt. Miss Honey becomes Matilda's biggest supporter and a genuine confidante, through the events at school and their heartfelt conversations, ultimately becoming a guardian for Matilda by the end of the story. This reinforces the theme of the value of chosen love and family beyond the confines of blood relations to young readers who might not feel as comfortable and loved by their blood-related family.

When Miss Trunchbull comes to teach Matilda's class, she is mean and abusive to the students and even Miss Honey, who tries to defend the students. This is followed by a humorous incident where Lavender places a newt in Miss Trunchbull's water jug. The next scene where Miss Trunchbull encounters the newt elicits exaggerated screams and causes her to faint. This not only provides amusement for readers and characters alike but also momentarily disrupts the power dynamics in the classroom. Further, Matilda's intervention through telekinetic powers in another prank of pretending to be the ghost of Miss Honey's father, changes the system of the school, revealing a letter from Miss Honey's father containing his will that grants her the ownership to her father's house and savings, and in Miss Trunchbull leaving town once she recovers from her unconsciousness.

As the book nears its end, Matilda is caught in a tense home environment with her parents urgently packing to avoid legal consequences for their deceiving actions, similar to the earlier escape of Miss Trunchbull because of confrontation with her dead brother's expectations of her and of how she has disappointed him. Despite the serious themes of abandonment and the breakup of her family, Dahl introduces a humorous twist towards the end, by depicting Matilda's parents' departure in a rushed and

unbothered manner. Their readiness to hand over their responsibilities to Miss Honey, who offers to care for Matilda free of cost, is presented not as a sad abandonment but as a convenient opportunity. This depiction, portraying the parents' indifference to their own daughter, shifts what could be a distressing situation into a moment of humor and a hopeful resolution in the story.

Rather than being shown as a loss, the family's abandonment of Matilda is seen as the realization of a desire for a nurturing and healthy relationship between her and Miss Honey, away from any form of mistreatment. This resolution helps young readers consider tragic themes of neglect and abandonment in a less intimidating way. By leading to a "happily ever after" end for Matilda, Dahl manages to soften the approach to presenting these broader issues to the youth, making the book both compelling and educational while maintaining its childish tone.

Finally, to conclude, *Matilda* is a book about family. Both Matilda and Miss Honey find themselves without a family that respects and loves them. Taking a bold stance for a children's book, the story does not disguise its plot by pretending that all families are happy and perfect. In the end, the two characters decide to make their own little family. Presenting this overall idea to young children inspires kindness and a deeper reflection on what family means. *Matilda* stresses that children require the love, respect, and support of their parents and guardians, yet it also puts forth that not all children receive this care. In its absence, the novel offers that a supportive network—understanding teachers, librarians, or friends—can act as a ray of light in difficult and challenging circumstances, hence, making the book a darker exploration of humanity which effectively lightens those experiences, through optimistic and satirical moments, making it easy for the child reader to get consumed in the dark yet empowering world of *Matilda*.

Works cited

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