

Children's Oppression in Roald Dahl's Children's Literature

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Abstract

The objectives of the study were to, 1) explore children's oppression depicted in Roald Dahl's children's stories, and 2) discuss the meanings of children's oppression intermingled in Roald Dahl's children's stories. The qualitative research approach was employed for the investigation and the results were presented in descriptive form. The examination unveiled that children's oppression was prevalently depicted in ten Dahlian stories for the 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). A multitude scenes of children's oppression in these Dahlian works were inspired by the author's personal life. In the meantime, Dahl's works for the children demonstrated the author's attempt to reflect the social issues to the readers.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Children's Oppression, Roald Dahl's Children's Stories

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Introduction

Children's oppression is difficult to define owing to different notions of cultures, parenting, personal values, religious beliefs, and education. Economic or social factors like poverty, filial duties, adultism or hierarchicalism may result in what the person considers as harmful or beneficial treatment to the children as well. Young (2004, pp. 37-38) asserts that any practice of dictatorship or tyranny by the ruling adults can create oppression and injustice for the children. As added by Boswell, even the concept of child abuse alone can be "complex and does not lend itself easily to its definition" (1996, p. 87). All things considered, the terms used for children's oppression such as abuse, neglect, exploitation, ill-treatment, maltreatment and so on can be also viewed from both the legal and cultural standpoints. Thus, it can be said that these terms are widely recognized for their indefinite meanings and can be interchangeably used.

Children's oppression happened with the beginning of the history of humans. Before the seventeenth century, the being of the children had never been discovered because the concept of childhood had not originated yet (Ariès, 1962, p. 25). So children were taken for granted and were treated improperly since the adults in the ancient society generally thought that children were not different from them, except for their small size. Grave treatments to the children were also derived from the child's dependency on the adults and theological belief. According to Lloyd De Mause's *The History of Childhood*, children were "killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized and sexually abused" (1974, p. 2). The infants were sacrificed to gods. Unwanted children would be left in the wild to be killed by animals. Girls or those who were born with some disabilities had often been discarded and exposed to natural dangers to die.

The living conditions of the children seemed to be better in the 1600s when John Locke (1632-1704) the English philosopher proposed his *Tabula Rasa* theorizing that children are born as “blank slates” ready to absorb whatever is taught or offered to them. Influenced by Locke’s perception, children were thought of as separate human beings who were innocent and they were treated better. Unfortunately, an industrialization in the 1800’s forced most poor Victorian children to work at an early age in textile mills, coal mines and business plants. Girls as young as five had become the maids or nurses of wealthy families. A number of ragged children crowded city streets. The lives of most destitute children were totally different from those of the minority rich (Gubar, 2009, p. 2). Then, the economic recessions which followed both World Wars brought about massive starvation, clothes, shelters and medicine shortages, and the murder of non-Aryan children who were considered unwanted or dangerous by the Nazis. As reported in *The Holocaust: A Historical Summary*, more than a million children, mostly Jewish, were killed during the Second World War (*The Holocaust: a historical summary*, 1997, p. 17). It is discernible that being a child in those days was rather tragic in so many ways.

The situations of children’s oppression around the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States were not different from what happened in Europe and England. Although the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was established in 1875, prior to the British child protection organizations (Myers, 2008, p. 449), children’s oppression in America went on in dreadful condition before the establishment of this organization. Oppression in America came with the institutionalization of slavery during the colonial era in the seventeenth century. Then, it increased during the American

Revolution. Based on the American history, oppression of the children could happen easily especially with the native American, African American, and ethnic minority American children. Often the enslaved black children were taken away from family without consent or were sold separately to buyers or traders with no biological parents or siblings. Owned by their masters, these black children had to work in the southern plantations or almshouses in the north during the civil war. Sometimes, those stronger and more powerful adults even used these children to gratify their sexual need. As enumerated in *A Short History of Child Protection in America*, the “news of the NYSPCC spread and by 1922, some 300 nongovernmental child protection societies were scattered across America” (Myers, 2008, p. 452). When the laws to penalize the children’s oppressors were enacted and more juvenile courts and non-governmental associations were inaugurated, the lives of these marginalized and deprived children seemed henceforth to get better.

Almost all Roald Dahl’s children’s stories were written from the 1960s to 1980s. At this stage of his life, he and his family alternated living and working in both England and the United States (Minneboo, 2012, p. 35). In light of the historical records, the sixties to the eighties in both countries were so eventful and dynamic incorporating the sociopolitical reforms; cultural and philosophical transformations; and an advancement in several disciplines: science, technology, medicine, psychology, etc. In these decades, the world was in the period of decolonization, great depressions, Cold War, and consumerism. The global societies were dissected into two political sides led by the American and Russian superpowers. There were so many changes and the world was apparently chaotic. Amidst these tumults, the formerly marginalized groups like women, gays, Blacks, Hispanics, workers and students stood up to

demand for social justice, freedom, individuality, autonomy, and suffrage (Anderson, 2007, p. 21; Hunt, 1999, p. 147). They deviated from social norms, protested and called for different kinds of rights. Governments were questioned and no longer trusted by the peoples. The baby boom from the previous decades in combination with the rapid economic growth, scientific and technological successes catalyzed antiwar movements, sexual and cultural revolts from the young generation (Marwick, 1998, p. 39). Students' uprisings erupted to resist severity of learning, living and evaluative system in schools and universities across England, France, Japan and America. The most famous demonstrations by mass students happened in Paris in May 1968 (Maurin & McNelly, 2008, p. 4). Similar to other global problems, oppression of the children remained and they turned to gain attention from the general public (Shaw, 2007, pp. 17-19). Indeed, children's oppression became the "national issue" of the United States in the 1960s (Myers, 2008, pp. 454-455). Officials and social workers from non-government organizations cooperated to find the solutions to these matters and physicians played an important role to awake the nation to be aware of the calamities of children's oppression.

Roald Dahl, as it has been said, was oppressed by teachers and bigger students when attending schools. According to his first autobiography *Boy: Tales of Childhood*, Dahl stated how depressed and painful it was when he and his friends were beaten by the sadistic teachers and school headmasters, "By now I am sure you will be wondering why I lay so much emphasis upon school beatings in these pages. The answer is that I cannot help it. All through my school life I was appalled by the fact that masters and senior boys were allowed literally to wound other boys, and sometimes quite severely. I couldn't get over it," (Dahl, 2001, pp. 144-145).

In this account of his own life, Dahl including all the young school boys were unfairly fagged by older school boys. As previously discussed, children's oppression has been deep-rooted in the society and it continually and increasingly happened in the period Dahl opted to write fiction for the children. Writing children's stories which are full of the portrayal of the maltreatment and cruelty that the adult antagonists inflict upon the child protagonists can be regarded as both Dahl's reaction to the bitter experiences he received and the campaign to call for attention and solutions for this social problem.

The study examines the author's views and attitudes towards children's oppression. The benefits of this study are to indicate the calamities of children's oppression, to help readers realize the power of children's literature in enhancing the readers' imagination and language skills. Also, reading this study is expected to help stimulate readers' compassion for the children. Thus, the ultimate hope of the analysis is to promote an awareness of the dangers of children's oppression to the public. With the speculated impact, children will be treated with understanding and kindness and oppression of the children would decrease after all.

Objectives of the Study

- 1) To explore children's oppression incorporated in Roald Dahl's children's literature.
- 2) To discuss the meanings and implications of children's oppression found in Roald Dahl's children's literature.

Scope of the Study

Ten Roald Dahl's works for children were chosen for the investigation of the portrayal of children's oppression. These stories included *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 method was adopted to investigate the purposes set in the paper and results of the investigation were presented in descriptive form.

Results

Children's oppression has become an outstanding trait of Roald Dahl's writings for the children. He wrote seventeen children and young people's stories altogether and ten of all these works display the adult characters and their metaphors who ill-treat the children both physically and mentally. These works include *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). In these Dahlian stories the child characters and their metaphors are physically mistreated by the adult antagonists and the metaphors for the adults. James of *James and the Giant Peach* is forced to work and he has to encounter with the deprivation of many basic needs such as food, clothes and shelter like Charlie in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and Sophie in *The BFG*. George of *George's Marvelous Medicine* is bossed around by his grandma while Matilda,

the school children at Cruchhem Hall School of *Matilda*, *The Twits*' monkeys, *The Magic Finger's* ducks and the child characters in several stories are badly fed, cruelly beaten, caged, tortured, killed and locked up in the narrow and thorny box. Some children and their metaphors are also figuratively killed, transformed, metamorphosed, etc. Witnessing the problems and difficulties which occurred to the children in the British and American societies in the twentieth century, Dahl deploys his stories to demonstrate to the public how painful and difficult it would be if the vulnerable and defenseless children were oppressed inhumanely or taken away unfairly a number of requisites for their physical wellbeing and development.

Physical oppression can certainly be harmful to the lives of the mistreated children. Besides getting bruises and pains on their bodies, the mental well-being of the Dahlian children and their metaphors will also be hurt and damaged by the different forms of physical oppression. In exploring Roald Dahl's chosen stories, it has been found that the mentalities of the child protagonists and the metaphors for the children have been assaulted in different ways by their adult villains. James, *The Magic Finger's* unnamed girl, George, the BFG, *Matilda* and *Matilda's* school children are often belittled and verbally humiliated: they are called names like stupid, twerp, runt, and so on. In his *Aggression Pays*, Buss describes that verbal attacks are "sharp" and can "bite like the serpent's sting" (1971, p. 7). Not less painful than physical assaults, if verbally offended, similar symptoms of posttraumatic disorders like panic, fear and nightmare may occur to the children (Sullaway, 2004, p. 250). More or less, all children can suffer psychological consequences immediately or permanently of these indignant and denigrating calls (Jay, 2009, pp. 85-86).

Apart from offensive speeches, many Dahlian child protagonists such as James, Charlie, Sophie and Matilda have to confront with negligence and discrimination. During his three-year stay with Aunts Sponge and Spiker, no toys nor any pictures or books have ever been given to James; James' aunts never take him out for a small walk or a picnic; neither the children nor any cat or dog is allowed to play with James or to keep him company (Dahl, 2008, p. 10). The Wormwoods would not have been noticed even when Matilda had crawled into their house in a broken leg (Dahl, 2008, p. 4). As described by Radford et al., poor supervision and unresponsive action to the child emotional needs are deemed the negligence. The lack of care was also found to be the most abundant kind of domestic oppression happening to all age groups of the children in the United Kingdom (2011, p. 45). In addition, poverty-stricken people have a very high tendency to suffer more from anxiety, emotional and behavioral disorders than non-poor children (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997, pp. 55-71). According to the case of Charlie, the penniless situation seems to affect many respects of his mental health. Like most poor children, Charlie lacks self-confidence and tends to be very quiet trying to dissociate himself from other friends who come from wealthy family during the chocolate factory tour. Except for his parents and grandparents, Charlie does not associate with any children of the same age at all. This will cause his life to become dull, lonely and inexperienced. Charlie's timidity and unassertiveness; therefore, could be regarded as his mental problems influenced by the family's financial deficiency.

The state of the children's mental health will be downgraded whenever they feel that their lives have been unsafe from the adult opponents. Indeed, reactions against fear and terror can be witnessed

if the unkind adults try to threaten, get rid of or cull the vulnerable and naïve children. George is oftentimes unnecessarily terrified with scary stories from his biological grandma. In response to his grandma's dreadful accounts, George instinctively harbors his abhorrence and contempt for her. As described in the story, "He was shaking a little. Oh, how he hated Grandma! ...that horrid old witchy woman" (Dahl, 2008, p. 12). Although George tries to convince himself not to be "frightened by her", but he has to admit to himself that actually "he was frightened" (Dahl, 2008, p. 12). Likewise, the terrifying thoughts of being chopped, boiled and baked for The Twits' fresh dinner make the four boys who are glued to the Twits' dead tree wail in panic, "He'll stew us alive! He'll cook us with carrots!" (Dahl, 2008, p. 43). Thus, children's fear becomes the focal issue of mental oppression depicted in most of Roald Dahl's chosen children's stories. In the meantime, all children in *The Enormous Crocodile*, *The BFG*, *The Witches*, mini people and little Billy in *The Minpins* are all hunted to be eaten as food, assaulted, tortured, confined, isolated and killed because of the adults' hatred and hostility. Based on *The Harmful Effects of Detention and Family Separation on Asylum Seekers' Mental Health in the Context of Bill C-31*, minors and juveniles who are frightened with stories and violence, detained (even in a short period of time), forced to do things against their will, whipped, and tormented will certainly confront with a multitude of negative mental health implications (Cleveland, Rousseau, & Kronick, 2012, p. 3). Damaged emotionally and psychologically by such agonizing abuses, these problematic symptoms can be predicted to bring about the detrimental impacts on the victimized children: bedwetting, nightmare, isolation, anxiety, sleep disorders, depression and, in the worst case scenario, suicidal behaviors. It is also revealed that whipped children, on the average, have the tendency to misbehave more in the future, while,

the unwhipped children, on the contrary, are likely to misbehave less. In addition, since the oppressed children's learning development is delayed from these emotional and psychological outcomes, their academic performance will decline, too. Moreover, the decrease in the grey matter of the oppressed children's brain will affect its cognitive performance (Tomoda et al., 2009, pp. 66-77). Thus, it can also be assumed that oppressed children are likely to study, concentrate and memorize things badly because the disturbing feelings of terror and distress always haunt their minds.

Discussion

It is discernible that Dahl's children's stories deal greatly with the children's primary needs. Based on Abraham Harold Maslow's *A Theory of Human Motivation* (1943, pp. 370-396), children's physiological needs include food, air, water, clothes, and shelter. When these children's basic needs are fulfilled, they will further acquire for the sense of safety and security. Therefore, food, clothes and shelters have been taken away from many fictional child characters in Roald Dahl's works for the children to remind and alert his readers that children may die and cannot survive and thrive if their basic needs are not met. In addition, to prepare the small readers to get ready for and learn to cope with all kinds of dangers and problems in their lives, Roald Dahl familiarizes his child audience with all dangerous creatures: animals, human and mythical beings. By identifying themselves with the Dahlian fictional children who are targeted to be victimized by the heartless creatures in the chosen stories, the child readers will be prompted to handle with hardship and perils in their lives whenever and wherever hazardous events befall them. As Donald Sturrock remarks, Dahl's children's stories, in many respects, could be regarded

as a “survival manual for children” about how to deal with both the “adult world” and all impediments of their living conditions (2010, p. 42).

Conclusion

Children’s oppression has been prevalently portrayed in Roald Dahl’s selected children’s stories making scenes of children’s oppression become the crucial attributes of his children’s literature; all the child protagonists and the metaphors for the children in the selected stories have been abused, neglected and mistreated physically and mentally by the adult antagonists and the metaphors for the adults. Biographically, the depiction of children’s oppression which permeates Dahl’s writings for the children is initially influenced by the author’s painful childhood experiences gained from the boarding schools (Dahl, 2001, pp. 144-145). That is to say, Roald Dahl’s identity has been partly shaped by being ill-treated at an early age by his school masters and bigger students. Being an essential element of Roald Dahl’s selfhood, oppression which is the main source of his ideations for his writings, has been demonstrated in many of his stories. Apart from the writer’s bitter childhood experiences, the contemporary children’s oppression which happened vastly in the British and American societies during the 1960-1980s, the period Roald Dahl was writing his children’s stories, can also presumably be deemed as the stimulator for Dahl’s fictional creation. In the second half of the twentieth century, as reported by many scholars, the rapid evolutions in terms of socio-economy, science, technology, culture and politics had been witnessed in the global community particularly in the American and European nations. Many marginalized peoples such as women, gays, black people, and students had staged rallies to call for their rights, equality and autonomy and freedom (Anderson, 2007, p. 21; Hunt, 1999, p. 147; Marwick, 1998, p. 39).

Amid these social uprisings, children's oppression also emerged as one of the important social issues (Shaw, 2007, pp. 17-19). These movements implied that those who used to be oppressed physically and mentally had attempted to call for changes in their societies. They needed the public to acknowledge their existence, listen to their voice, and attend to their needs. Similar to his contemporary social activists, Road Dahl has employed his children's stories as a tool to promote an awareness of the children's well-being. Reading Dahl's children's stories, the audience's compassion for the oppressed children is inspired whereas the messages to call for resolutions of the social issues of children's oppression are traceable from these literary contents.

Recommendation

Road Dahl's writings comprise of short stories for the adults, children's stories, poems, screenplays and some non-fiction articles. Many writing awards were bestowed to this writer: Edgar Allen Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America (1959), Federation of Children's Book Group Award (1983), Whitbread Award (1983), and World Fantasy Convention Award (1983). Dahl's children's books were produced as stage plays, television dramas and films and they were translated into many languages. Since the development of the children can be enhanced by reading or using children's books, it is recommended that various classroom activities or bedtime story telling can be set based on Dahl's writings for children. Parents and teachers can make several uses from his works to promote the children's imagination and to stimulate their critical thoughts. Most importantly, literary researchers, depending on their interest, can study Dahl's children's works by using different lenses or employing various theories. Topics that researchers should conduct their future studies

may include typical themes in Roald Dahl's children's literature, linguistic elements of Roald Dahl's writing style, Roald Dahl's children's point of view, realism and fantasy in Dahl's works, a comparison between Roald Dahl's works and those of other authors, etc.

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