

**GROUP 2**  
**ENGLISH B EXTENDED ESSAY**

Analysing Roald Dahl's Works For Children As a Means of Social Criticism

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## **Abstract**

Roald Dahl is one of the best-known authors of the 20th century when it comes to works for children and his style is characterized by his significant use of irony and satire. Even though many of his books have become children's classics, not many studies have been conducted on the societal view in his books and the elements of social criticism. This study analyzes the social aspect of Dahl's works for children, through investigating the means, subjects and significance of the social criticism.

Dahl uses certain methods to convey the message of social criticism in his works. The most commonly used methods are making bad characters go through a "bad ending", creating certain character stereotypes and ridiculing characters. The social criticism is targeted at certain groups as well. These are adults, especially authority figures such as headmasters, the rich and those who are unable to take action when needed. Social problems such as violence, corporal punishment and TV addiction are also mostly criticized by the use of allegorical characters. As Dahl states in his autobiography "Boy", his memories have left deep marks in his personal development and writing career: "Some are painful. Some are unpleasant. I suppose that is why I have always remembered them so vividly." (Dahl, "Boy" Introduction) Thus, the reason why he discusses social issues in his works is mainly based on his childhood memories and experiences.

(229 words)

## **Introduction**

Roald Dahl is one of Britain's most famous writers in the field of children's literature. He has also written quite popular stories and novels for adults. Dahl has published more than 20 books for children during his career as a writer. Books such as "*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*" and "*Matilda*" have reached millions of kids all around the world and have become children's classics.

What makes Dahl different from many other children's authors is his extraordinary style. His cynical and ironic approach to his subject matter and characters can be seen in almost all his works for children. He has a unique way of describing characters and this adds unusual twists to his stories. Although such elements of Dahl's style have been explored quite often, not many studies have been conducted on sociological aspects. Actually, many elements of social criticism can be found in Dahl's books for children, when studied and examined closely.

Social criticism, in literature mostly is the representation and analyses of human flaws. Most of the time, society is criticized by use of dystopias or by clever use of language and various characterization techniques. In children's works, most commonly used methods are connected with characters that serve as analogies for certain social problems. Black humour is also frequently used and social messages are given through ridiculing certain characters and situations. Sociological criticism of literary works has been carried out through a specific system of analysis, influenced by the "social determinism" theory of Taine. Taine argues that there is, to a certain extent, determinism in literature and that the creators of literary pieces are influenced by the physical and social conditions they live in. (Taine, vol. 1, 13) Therefore, according to sociological criticism, a literary work should be analyzed in relation with the social background of the time in order to reach conclusions about the societal view in the piece. Lastly, it should be noted that the importance and presence of literary social

criticism has increased considerably after the industrial revolution. Thus, social critique is often aimed at elements from the lifestyle of the post-industrial era, criticizing the errors of the current life shaped by technology.

The societal view in Dahl's works can be examined in relation with the methods of sociological criticism. In his works for children there is a sense of social criticism that is created through character descriptions, repelling portrayal of some authority figures as well as certain unpleasant experiences that the characters go through.

## Methods of Social Criticism

Roald Dahl mainly uses two different methods to convey his criticism. One method he uses quite often is to ridicule certain characters. Through their descriptions or behaviours, Dahl turns his characters into objects to be made fun of. Being a great fan of black humour, Dahl often uses it to relay certain messages. (McCray, par. 1) His choice of words when describing a character that is against his societal view reveals his unpleasant feelings. For example the description of Augustus Gloop , who is a character from “*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*”, reflects his strong disapproval of the character’s never-ending hunger. “The picture showed a nine-year-old so enormously fat he looked as though he had been blown up with a powerful pump. Great flabby folds of fat bulged out from every part of his body, and his face was like a monstrous ball of dough with two small greedy curranty eyes peering out upon the world.” (Dahl, 36) Roald Dahl also uses other characters’ speeches to give similar messages. The songs sung by Oompa-Loompas in “*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*” are good examples of this technique. Augustus is made fun of in their song: “Augustus Gloop! Augustus Gloop!/ The great big greedy nincompoop!/ How long could we allow this beast/ To gorge and guzzle, feed and feast”(Dahl, 104)

Another method that he uses is the “bad ending”. “Bad” characters that do evil to the good ones are treated harshly. In other words, adults that bother children are punished severely. This technique contributes to the sense of absolute morality in Dahl books that gives no chance whatsoever to the “bad” ones. One example of a “bad ending” is the character Miss Trunchbull, the headmistress in the book “*Matilda*”. Throughout the book, Miss Trunchbull treats the students very badly and hurts them physically. “ You blithering idiot! shouted the Trunchbull. You festering gumboil! You fleabitten fungus!” (Dahl, 212) In the end, the main character Matilda ,who has the power to move things with her thoughts, uses her talent to take revenge. “ Miss Truchbull has fallen down! Miss Trunchbull is on the floor!” (Dahl, 217) A

similar punishment of “bad” adults is seen in “*James and the Giant Peach*”. James’ aunts Sponge and Spiker treat him very badly. They are so obsessed with the idea of getting rich that they do not even feed James properly. “The disgusting little brute will only get in everyone’s way if we let him wander about. ... We’re too busy to make food! We are counting our money!” (Dahl, 26-27) In the end, the aunts are smashed by a giant peach. “The peach rolled on. And behind it, Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker lay ironed out upon the grass as flat and thin, lifeless as a couple of paper dolls cut out of a picture book.” (Dahl,49)

## Subjects of Social Criticism

Dahl uses the above mentioned techniques to criticize certain groups or individuals in the society. "The adult is the enemy of the child because of the awful process of civilizing this thing that, when it is born, is an animal with no manners, no moral sense at all." (Yardley, par.4) These are Dahl's words, quoted from an interview published in the Washington Post. This quite negative approach towards adulthood is seen in Dahl's works and not so surprisingly, one of the major subjects of criticism in Dahl's books is adults who abuse their authority to pressurize and manipulate youngsters. However, not all adults are dealt with harshly in Dahl books. Many adult characters are of great help to the main character such as the Grandma in "*Witches*", who protects her grandson and supports him at all times. In Dahl books, the common targets of criticism are adults who oppress children or set a bad example for them with their dominating behaviour.

The first group of adults that are criticized frequently are those that are not brave enough to take action or act unconventionally. Typically, the main hero in Dahl books is a child, surrounded by many adults who are not capable of changing the course of the story. They usually have weak personalities and hesitate when it comes to acting, even though they are powerful in terms of their roles in the society. For example, a strong official, or the father in the family can be the one who can not act without the help of a youngster. One of the best examples of this adult stereotype would be the Head of Air Force and the Head of Army in "*The BFG*" (Big Friendly Giant) which features an army operation that is to be carried out to stop bad giants from eating children; however, the Heads, who are normally perceived as adults holding authority, are unable to decide on what to do and therefore are called as "'biffsquiggled" by the BFG. (Dahl, "The BFG" 180) In the end BFG and Sophie, who is a little girl, lead the operation. There is a similar example in the story "*The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me*". In a moment of burglary, the Duke starts panicking at the sight of the burglar "



Call the police! Summon the army! Bring up the cannon! Charge with the Light Brigade!" (Dahl, "Treasury" 79). These are the solutions that come to his mind and he is unable to come up with creative plans. Luckily, the little boy and the animals who accompany him come up with an intelligent plan and the burglar is captured instantly.

Adults who have authority are subject to severe criticism as well. Authority figures that are criticized frequently are parents and headmasters who represent two important institutions in a child's life: the family and the school. In Dahl's books, not every adult who has authority is criticized; it is rather the adults who misuse their authority against children that are subjects of criticism.

Parents are the main actors in one's life during childhood. They are the ones who teach children what is right and what is wrong, preparing them for the social life. During this process there is usually some tension between the parent and the child. This situation is seen in Dahl books. His approach to the parent-child relationship can be best understood by taking a look at his own words. Here are some statements taken from the *"Roald Dahl Guide to Railway Safety"* in which Dahl analyzes the adult-children relationship thoroughly. "Young people are fed up with being told by grown-ups WHAT TO DO and WHAT NOT TO DO..." (Dahl, "Treasury" 305) is the opening statement of the guide. Capitalization of certain words strengthens the disapproval of parents. After this, Dahl goes on to explain that parents do not remember how it is like to be a child and states that adults are like giants. "When you are born you are an uncivilised little savage with bad habits and no manners and it is the job of the giants (your parents and your teachers) to train you and discipline you." (Dahl, "Treasury" 306) After explaining that it is the job of parents to "civilize" children, Dahl analyzes the consequences of this responsibility. "What is the result of this? Deep down inside the child's mind (subconsciously) the giants become THE ENEMY. Even your loving parents become THE ENEMY." (Dahl, "Treasury" 306) This approach towards parents is

seen in Dahl's books and parents are often represented as "the enemy". However, it should be noted that parents are not criticized merely because they are parents. In many cases, Dahl portrays family as a source of happiness and comfort. What he criticizes is the parents who oppress their children, set bad examples for them or perform behaviour that may have negative impacts on their development. One of the best examples of this is seen in "*Matilda*". The main character Matilda has parents who treat her badly. His father keeps telling her that she is not an important individual because being a girl, she won't be helping him in his business. "You're too stupid. But I don't mind telling young Mike here about it seeing he'll be joining me in the business one day." (Dahl, "Matilda" 16) What's more, Matilda is often insulted by her parents "You're just an ignorant little squirt who hasn't the foggiest idea what you're talking about!" (Dahl, "Matilda" 19) Her parents do not see her education as an important thing and even forget to make the proper arrangements required for Matilda to start school. In the end, her parents are treated harshly like many adult characters in Roald Dahl books. Another example of such a parent-child relationship would be from "*The Minpins*". In this book, the main character Billy is not allowed to do many things that he would like to. "...Little Billy's mother was always telling him exactly what he was allowed to do and what he was not allowed to do." Billy is always forced to be "good" and he finds this quite difficult to manage. "...Little Billy was awfully tired of being good." (Dahl, "Treasury" 168)

Parents who do not raise their children properly are subject to criticism as well. Veruca Salt's parents in "*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*" are an example of this. They are disapproved of because they spoil Veruca. "[A]s soon as my little girl told me that she simply needed to have one of those Golden Tickets, I went out into the town and started buying all the Wonka bars I could lay my hands on. Thousands of them, I must have bought. Hundreds of thousands!" (Dahl, 40) This is how Veruca's father explains their search for a Golden Ticket. In the end, they are thrown down the garbage pipe while trying to get some

squirrels for Veruca. A song sung by Oompa-lumpas just after this incident explains how they are seen as bad parents: “Who spoiled her then? Ah, who indeed? [...] Alas you needn’t look so far? / To find out who these sinners are. [...] Her loving parents, MUM and DAD./ And that is why we’re glad they fell/ Into the rubbish chute as well.” (Dahl, 148)

The second place which tries to “civilize” the child is the school and the headmasters are the authority figures who represent the school. As a part of Dahl’s protest against such institutions which impose boundaries on kids are the headmasters who are represented as characters who scare kids and treat them badly. The typical evil headmaster is Miss Trunchbull from “*Matilda*”. “ She was a gigantic holy terror, a fierce tyrannical monster who frightened the life out of pupils and teachers alike.” (Dahl, 61) Miss Trunchbull insults the students and does not hesitate to impose physical violence on them. Her reaction to a female student who has pigtails demonstrates her bad treatment: “ You look like a rat with a tail coming out of its head!” After this insult, she lifts the student from the floor and throws her like a hammer: “ [T]he Trunchbull let go of the pigtails and Amanda went sailing like a rocket right over the wire fence of the playground and high into the sky.”(Dahl, “*Matilda*” 108) A similar headmaster is the one in “*Lucky Break*” a short story from the book “*The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar*”. In this story, all students are afraid of the headmaster and try all sorts of things to be absent from the morning inspection when they have to face the headmaster. “ Everyone of us was terrified of the two sharp brown eyes under their bushy eyebrows as they travelled slowly up and down the length of one’s body.” (Dahl, 172)

Roald Dahl does not only criticize authority figures or adults, but he also conveys messages about certain social issues. He is against any extreme addictions or bad habits. One of the groups that he frequently criticizes are the spoiled rich people who want too much. This is done through certain characters in his works and some statements that his characters make.

One example of this type is the character Veruca Salt in the book “*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*”. Veruca is a very spoilt little girl who wants to own everything. “Get me one of those squirrels! [...] All I’ve got at home is two dogs and four cats and six bunny rabbits and two parakeets and three canaries and a green parrot and a turtle and a bowl of goldfish and a cage of white mice and a silly old hamster. I want a *squirrel!*” (Dahl, 141) After being very persistent in getting “one of those squirrels” Veruca falls into the garbage chute which is a very inappropriate and uncomfortable place for a rich little girl like her. Characteristics of rich people are often generalized and they are subject to many ridicules. Such a rich and spoilt character is found in the story “*The Crocodile*”. This is how Miss Violet is described: “ Oh, she was rich and she was fine/ With cars galore and heaps of wine!/ Now with the rich there is a rule,/ They always build a swimming pool” (Dahl, “Treasury” 146)

Dahl also criticizes violence in his works. He primarily condemns violence on kids. Headmasters or other authority figures that harm children are treated harshly in his books. In addition to this, Dahl also criticizes violence targeted at animals. Characters who try to hurt animals are victims of a “bad ending”. “*The Twits*” is such a book that features characters who are fascinated with guns and violence. “Let’s go inside and load our lovely new guns and then it’ll be *bang bang bang* and Bird Pie for supper.” (Dahl, “Treasury” 23) This statement by Mr. and Mrs. Twit is followed by them being glued to the ceiling by the birds they were planning to shoot. The book “*Fantastic Mr. Fox*” features similar characters as well. Some characters make plans to kill Fantastic Mr. Fox: “He must be killed!” cried Bean. [...] We will wait there until he comes out and...*Bang! Bang-bang-bang*” (Dahl, “Treasury” 61). However, their plans do not work out as the fox they are trying to kill acts smartly and builds an underground net of tunnels right into their chicken houses, managing to live safely along with other animals while the farmers are struggling outside to get hold of him.

The increasing role of TV in family life is another subject of criticism in Dahl's works. Characters who give too much importance to TV and who are addicted to it are disapproved. One of the most well-known examples of this is the character Mike Teavee from "*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*". Augustus is a small child who is addicted to TV and has no other interests. "Didn't I tell you not to interrupt! This show's an absolute whiz-banger! It's terrific! I watch it every day. I watch all of them every day, even the rotten ones, where there's no shooting." (Dahl, 50) His extreme interest in TV gets him into trouble in Wonka's Chocolate Factory and he is reduced to a tiny creature while trying to be transmitted via the TV. The following song by Oompa-Loompas summarizes how terrible and harmful television could be: "IT ROTTS THE SENSES IN THE HEAD!/ IT KILLS IMAGINATION DEAD!/ IT CLOGS AND CLUTTERS UP THE MIND!/ IT MAKES A CHILD SO DULL AND BLIND/ HE CAN NO LONGER UNDERSTAND/ A FANTASY; A FAIRYLAND!" (Dahl, 172) The capitalization makes the disparagement even stronger and constitutes a warning for parents. The mother from the book "*Matilda*" is another character who is very fond of the TV. Matilda's family life lacks communication as their entire family activity is watching TV. Matilda is put down by her family because she likes reading books instead of watching TV. "Now keep your nasty mouth shut so we can all watch this programme in peace." (Dahl, 20) This is the response Matilda gets from her mom when she tries to get permission to read a book rather than eat in front of the TV.

## **Reactions to Social Criticism in Roald Dahl Books**

The presence of elements of social criticism in Dahl books have brought mixed reactions from readers and critics. Victims of criticism in Dahl's works are often authority figures, parents or social institutions. As a result of this, Dahl books have been quite popular with adolescents, especially early teenagers. With the arrival of teenage years the child goes through a period of confusion and rebellion, often complaining about the behaviour of adults around him. Dahl's harsh treatment of adults, and his mocking approach towards authority figures such as headmasters, are parallel to the feelings of adolescents. Additionally, the hero in Dahl books is always a child who is capable of doing things that seem impossible. This approach towards the power of the youth also creates a feeling of confidence and hope in young adults, which increases the interest in his books.

On the other hand, Dahl's societal view has brought a great deal of negative criticism from parents and critics. Firstly, he has been accused of over-criticizing adults, creating disconcerting feelings in his readers. It has been argued that the presentation of authority figures and their often being humiliated brutally gives way to feelings of rebellion and dislike. The heightened disapproval of adults is largely due to the understanding of absolute morality in Dahl books, which has also been criticized. In an article published in *Children's Literature in Education* (1998) David Rees addresses this issue by stating that "The trouble with Dahl's world is that it is black and white--two-dimensional and unreal". (Rees, 144) This complete contrast between the good and the bad does not apply to real life and gives false impressions to young readers who can easily be affected by the books they read. "Totally brutal" and "absolutely evil" adults in Dahl's works lead young children to believe that such stereotypes can also be applied to the people around them.

All in all, the societal view revealed in Dahl books has caused varied criticisms from different groups. His negative portrayal of adults and absolute sense of morality that does not

allow any shades of grey have led many teenagers to adore his books while triggering  
disconcerting emotions on part of parents and critics.

## **Roald Dahl's Social Criticism with Respect to His Own Life Experiences**

Social criticism found in Dahl books can be associated with his real life. His critical approach to authority figures and his cynical view of the society in general are very much related to his childhood experiences. In Dahl's words: "[T]hroughout my young days at school and just afterwards a number of things happened to me that I have never forgotten. .... Each of them made such a tremendous impression on me that I have never been able to get them out of my mind" (Dahl, "Boy" Introduction)

Dahl grew up in the United Kingdom; however his Norwegian origins caused him to be isolated from the society. Later on, he was sent to English schools and his experience in these schools, where corporal punishment was not forbidden, left him with painful memories that would later on be converted to elements of social criticism in his books. The headmaster was a frightening element in Dahl's life: "...all Headmasters are giants, and this one was no exception. [...] he gave the kind of flashing grin a shark might give to a small fish just before he gobbles it up." (Dahl, "Boy" 78) Dahl was beaten severely several times in the schools he attended. After being removed from preparatory school as a result of being ruthlessly beaten, Dahl was sent to Repton. In this prestigious private school the headmaster was a clergyman who flogged students harshly. His experiences in this school caused Dahl to question religion as part of authority:

"...And not long after that it was he himself who had the task of crowning our present Queen in Westminster Abbey with half the world watching him in on the television. Well, well well! And this was the man who used to deliver the most vicious beatings to boys under his care! ... If this person, I kept telling myself, was one of God's chosen salesmen on earth, then there must be something wrong about the whole business."  
(Dahl, "Boy" 146)



Such school experiences in Dahl's life have affected his criticism of authority figures and schools. For example Miss Trunchbull, the headmaster in “Matilda”, is very much parallel to the headmasters Dahl met in his real life.

His early depart from home and his experiences in boarding school have also affected Dahl's works. Dahl had to leave Wales to go to Repton when he was just 9. His memories about the first days in schools and his homesickness reflect that it was quite hard for him to get used to living far away from his family. “I was so devastatingly homesick during my first two weeks that I set about devising a stunt for getting myself sent back home, even if it were only a few days.” (Dahl, “Boy” 93) Given the hard conditions in the schools he attended, Dahl developed a talent to survive on his own. His quite independent childhood has been reflected in his works through young heroes who are can accomplish great things without adults' help.

In addition to this, his targets of criticism are in harmony with the time he lives in. Subjects of criticism such as over-consumption, addiction to TV and violence are all current problems, influenced by the capitalist order.

## **Conclusion**

All in all, many elements of social criticism are found in Dahl's works for children. The criticism is done through certain methods that are common to many works. These are the use of bad endings and certain character stereotypes. The subjects of criticism are especially parents and other authority figures who misuse their authority in almost all cases. Moreover, some common problems such as dependency on TV, spoilt children and violence are also criticized. This inclusion of social criticism in Dahl works, and the often cynical societal view are elements which add deeper layers of meaning to his works, while aiming to raise awareness about social problems and issues of the time. Thus, elements of social criticism are found dominantly in Dahl books and they are one of the most important characteristics that set his works apart from many other works of literature for children.

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