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MATILDA AND THE WITCHES

The Heteronormative Illustrated in Dahl

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Abstract

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Abstract: This essay explores the view on gender in Roald Dahl's *Matilda* and *The Witches*. From a queer perspective, the essay examines the message residing in the intermedial space of the text-image relationship. Analysing several character's gender performances from both books, the conclusion found that Dahl, in these books, favours assigning queer descriptors to bad characters, and heteronormative descriptors to good characters. Furthermore, the analysis points out several examples of the illustrations and text contradicting as well as amplifying each other.

Keywords: Roald Dahl, Quentin Blake, *Matilda*, *The Witches*, gender, intermediality, children's literature, illustrations

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1. Introduction

1.1 The relationship between illustrations and text

Today, the books originating from the mind of Roald Dahl have been interpreted in many ways: as musicals, movies, and illustrations. In the books, one is more often than not accompanied by such interpretive illustrations made by Quentin Blake. This essay sets out to examine the working relationship between Roald Dahl and Quentin Blake. Most commonly when these books are researched by scholars, the focus falls on Dahl. The illustrations by Blake, which most of the time are thought of as an integral part of Dahl's stories, are excluded. My aim is to analyse the two components (text and image) in combination. Looking at this way of telling a story through illustrations and text, I ask: How does the intermedial relationship between text and image affect our understanding of gender in the novels *Matilda* and *The Witches* by Roald Dahl?

These two books were chosen out of Dahl's large bibliography due to their similarities in how Dahl's characters perform gender. Books for children carry the question of what message the author would like to convey to the reader, which often express morality and values that can turn outdated or no longer accurate. In this intermediality, there is the opportunity for an interesting queer reading, as the illustrated characters in Dahl's books symbolise something else: the level of conformity to heteronormativity.

Queer theory is thus important to use in order to stay vigilant of the norms present in the material, with the goal of not becoming complicit in said norms. Representation of all genders (and sexualities, races, and religions, or lack thereof) has become increasingly important. I hypothesize that by putting the text-illustration relationship under the microscope and analysing that divide, one can take that material and through queer theory become aware of what attitudes towards gender the book is representing.

2. Background

2.1 The author and the illustrator

When asked whether he does any drawings for grown-ups, Quentin Blake answers that he avoids those terms. Blake says: “the truth is I don’t make much distinction between the drawings that I do for children and the ones I do for grown-ups. To me, it’s all just drawing” (quentinblake.com). This is well suited for the extra layer of gothic reality presented in Dahl’s books, as such elements often play with the line between what is acceptable in society and what is not. Both *Matilda* and *The Witches* are gothic in both their unsuspecting and rather odd endings. By not looking at illustrations as for either children or grown-ups, but rather as means to further the story, one avoids the risk of “dumbing down” illustrations to fit the target audience. Had Blake chosen to focus too much on the fact that these are books for children, he could have risked the illustrations turning out too “soft”, ultimately mismatching the text.

Interestingly, Blake’s view on the relationship between text and illustrations is more open than one would imagine. He compares the task to “directing a play, or playing a piece of music”, saying that “the interpretation can be various” (bbc.com). This way of thinking about illustrations – the text being a script and the illustrations the way in which the story is told – means that the illustrations add their own characteristic layer to a story. This is further motivation to why analysing the images is important for this essay. Blake himself is actualising the theory of illustrations extending the story into another dimension.

Speaking of his relationship with Dahl, Blake recounts that “what was so nice about Roald was that he actually wanted the pictures – he didn't like it if there weren't enough” (quentinblake.com). By looking at the illustration following that passage, one can see Dahl and Blake conversing in front of a table of papers. This leads to the assumption that when illustrating Dahl’s books, there was a discussion on what should be illustrated and how those illustrations should look. One might further assume that all images are approved by Dahl, and thus we can draw the following conclusion: while Blake’s sentiments about illustrations are interpretations of a story, and there can be many versions, the illustrations made for Dahl are the canonical version.



(quentinblake.com)

3. Literature review

The books in question are two of Dahl's perhaps most well-examined stories. Several analyses favour not only queer theory, but gender and feminist theory as well – perhaps not surprising as these three theories are overlapping, yet differently aimed. In order to properly capture the issue, an overlay is almost a must.

An example of this can be found in the previous research for *The Witches* (1983). While some argue the text is overtly misogynist (Tso 2002, Bird 1998), others feel it is a great example of gender ambiguity. Jennifer Mitchell (2012) argues the latter, writing that she reads *The Witches* as a great example of Judith Butler's school of thought. The narrator in *The Witches*, a young, orphaned boy living with his *Grandmamma*, is at one point transformed into a mouse. Mitchell points to this as a great example of how the novel "detaches traditional gender from conventional sex" (37), explaining this could be read as a coming out. According to Mitchell, "because mouse functions as a surrogate for gender in the text, readers come face-to-face with the compelling possibility that gender identity is variable, playful, and inherently experimental" (37), a convincing statement that lends a new way of reading the passage. However, while this interpretation sees the issue from a queer perspective, Anne-Marie Bird (1998) credits the narrator's quick acceptance of his newfound mouse-ness to a common childhood fear: separation anxiety. Bird suggests this due to "a mouse's shorter life span being compatible with that of the narrator's aged, beloved Grandmamma" (120). As the main character is an orphan, one can understand how important she is to him and how scary it would be to lose her. In the symbolism in the coming-out as a mouse, it is not clear whether Bruno is welcomed back into his family, thus realizing the narrator's fear of being alone. While being a mouse allows the narrator to shorten his lifespan to avoid a life without his family, perhaps Bruno has been cursed with the opposite.

In addition to these situational-type analyses, several researchers utilize a structural approach to Dahl. The aforementioned criticized misogynist message is most often pointed to in the description of the witches. "I do not wish to speak badly of women", Dahl tries to reassure, but Tso (2012) exemplifies the "monstrous-feminine" in Dahl's descriptions, noting that "the misogynistic notion is reflected in the demonic portrayal of the female antagonists" (227). Mitchell retorts the distinction between woman and witch to be "blurry at best" (28).

Matilda (1988) has also been subjected to scrutiny. Misplaced in the Wormwoods, Matilda feels entitled to a higher social class than her own. This identity and class transition is interpreted by Bruno Galván (2019), writing that “the importance of literature and education is one of the most relevant messages” (6). This message is emphasised through the educators: Miss Honey and Miss Trunchbull. Elizabeth Marshall (2016) offers insight into these contrasting characters: “This idea of the mother as the ideal pedagogue continues to be reproduced visually and verbally in cultural text of childhood in the form of a friendly, child-centred, white, heterosexual teacher”. She further argues that “the ongoing salience of this representation in popular culture is clear” (463). Describing Miss Honey as “child-like, motherly”, Marshall positions her opposite “the monstrous Ms Trunchbull” (463). Furthermore, the “good, maternal teacher” is “characterized by the enforced and socially approved female virtues [...]”, she argues. As such, Marshall sees the “mother-teacher” as primarily emphatically caring, while Clémentine Beauvais (2015) argues that the caring educator’s goal is to encourage learning.

Matilda’s intelligence gives her a feeling of uniqueness, thus expecting certain privileges, akin to how those inside a norm, e.g., a heteronormative, could feel entitled to privilege not offered to those outside the norm. Beauvais points to Matilda’s actions being enabled and encouraged by the narrator – most notably in the passages of Matilda’s “pranks”. One can note several encouraging adjectives confirming her thesis: the narrator explains how Matilda’s “*wonderfully* subtle mind” was working on “yet *another suitable* punishment” (Dahl 35, my italics). While focusing on the narrator, Beauvais includes the illustrations. One of Matilda’s pranks could be read as an attack on Mr Wormwood’s masculinity (286), which the images amplify, she claims. By hiding a talking parrot, Matilda highlights how her father does not fulfil the societal expectation of “protecting his family” and not living up to the standard of “man”. Beauvais writes that “Blake confirms that Mr. Wormwood gets lost in the living room, creeping down the corridor after Matilda, Michael, and their mother” (286). Galván agrees that Blake’s illustrations corroborate Dahl’s text. However, he does not seem to agree with Beauvais fully, writing: “Blake’s illustrations have always played an important role in providing a visual explanation and reinforcing the humor contained [...]” (3).

Mrs Wormwood is also thoroughly analysed by both Galván and Beauvais. While Beauvais argues that “the physical description of Mrs. Wormwood is damning [...] inasmuch as she represents natural female ugliness ill-rectified by cheap artifice [...]” (284), Galván focuses on another detail: her jewellery. This is a detail not mentioned by Dahl, but a choice made by Blake, something Galván interprets as an amplification of the text’s intended view of Mrs Wormwood. “The most salient inclusions in Mrs. Wormwood’s depiction are the jewelry”,

Galván writes, arguing that emphasis is not “on the ornaments themselves, but on the situations she models them” which “underlines two of her most notable features: plainness and stupidity” (9). Beauvais opposes this is Mrs Wormwood’s fault: “[She] is shamed for being, by nature, an unappealing woman, and, by culture, unable to make the right choices to remedy this issue with good taste” (285).

These analyses have shown us that the complexity of Dahl’s characters lies beyond the static images or text on a page, and one must combine the two to fully answer the question posed in the introduction.

4. Theory and method

4.1 Text-image analysis

As Galván (2019) explains in his essay, analysing a relationship between text and image is to carry out what he calls an “intersemiotic translation”, defining it as “translations [...] between different sign systems or media” (4). He goes on to explain how illustrations can do several things: offer the same information as the text, expand the information, or offer alternative information (5). In other words, illustrations play an important role and affect how we perceive the story, creating an intermedial space between text and image. Lee Galda and Kathy G. Short (1993) argue that illustrations are not only vital for the development of children’s visual literacy but for their ability to “explore, reflect, and critique those images” (506). Galda and Short suggest that “as children explore illustrations and develop the ability to read images, they will attain deeper meanings from literature and an awareness of how visual images are used in their own meaning making” (506). This sets the scene for the method used in this analysis – the dual meaning found in illustrated literature.

This intermediality Galván discusses has been researched further by Anna Nordenstam and Margareta Wallin Wictorin (2019). They argue for a multimodal use of literary studies in symbiosis with image analysis, rather than looking at the two schools as separate entities. Nordenstam and Wallin Wictorin outline a method of intermedial analysis for the relationship between text and illustrations, aiming to give a clearer view of what the book has left unsaid. Starting by describing the illustration, they give an overview of the picture before noting the details, before finally looking at what the text says (153). The close reading of the text gives special attention to observing what the text does and does not tell the reader, and what one can derive from the illustrations: often, these two only correspond up to a certain point. This roadmap outlines how this essay will proceed in analysing the material.

4.2 Queer theory and gender theory

Using Judith Butler’s (1990) theory about gender performativity, which views “performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical” (xxv), the analysis of the illustrations in relation to the text can gather insight into how gender is perceived in *Matilda* and *The Witches*. Furthermore, an aspect of this analysis builds on using queer as well as gender theory. It is difficult to not

mention aspects of gender and feminist theories when attempting a queer reading, as the three are closely related.

“Queer” famously avoids definitions, attempting to be “anti-binary”, or “anti-normative”. Annamarie Jagose (1996) remarks: “Queer is widely perceived as calling into question conventional understandings of sexual identity by deconstructing the categories, oppositions and equations that sustain them” (97). Furthermore, Jagose explains that “[...] Queer theory may be used to describe an open-ended constituency, whose shared characteristics is not identity itself but an anti-normative positioning with regard to sexuality” (98), underlining the undefined aspects of queer theory. A closely connected line of feminist theory has been exploring this “not-being” as well, both theories seeing the possibilities in being undefined. “Feminist subjects in refusing to be well-adjusted not only mourn the losses but in mourning open up other possibilities for living, as openings that we inherit over generations” (79), Sara Ahmed (2010) writes, exploring “happiness” and the unsuspected trap that the concept of happiness might be. While the second wave of feminism relied heavily on the concept of *becoming alive*, the same concept also inherently meant “to leave happiness for life is to become alive to possibility” (79). Ahmed stresses the importance of “our feminist archive”, meaning the thoughts and theories that “we inherit over generations” (79), arguing both queer and feminism is ever-evolving. However, this undefined way of thinking is not without criticism. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1997) remarks that “what seems least settled is any predetermined idea about what makes the queerness of a queer reading. Often these reading begin from or move toward sites of same-sex, interpersonal eroticism” (2), turning the reading into a self-fulfilling prophecy. If one looks for queer, one will find it – the reader “[...] is reading for important news about herself, without knowing what form that news will take” (3). While Jagose explains that “the queer project makes an effort to speak from and to the differences and silences that have been suppressed by the homo-hetero binary [...]” (99), Sedgwick reminds us to avoid trying to define queer as an alternative to this binary.

This binary viewpoint, i.e., heterosexuality being “normal”, is something that queer theory has long since taken issue with. If hetero is normative, there must be a counterweight, the “un-normal”. It applies to more than sexual orientations – “queer has tended to occupy a predominantly sexual register. Recent signs indicate, however, that its denaturalising project is being brought to bear on other axes of identification than sex and gender” (99), Jagose claims. Butler contextualises this by writing:

If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false,

but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity.
(Butler, 174)

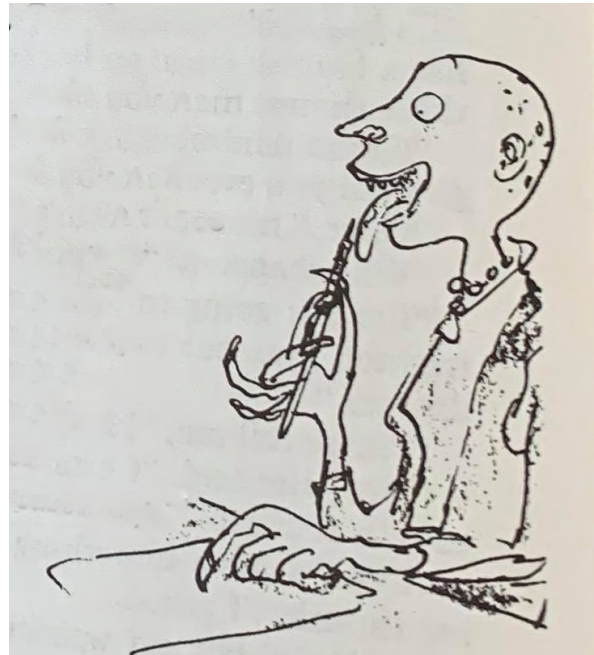
Based on this quote, the question arises whether the female characters in Dahl are illustrated as deviations from the heteronormative expectation of a singular gender performance, or if Dahl and Blake have left room for gender as a spectrum.

5. Analysis

5.1 The witches

The focus of Dahl's *The Witches* is undoubtedly the namesake - witches. There is no country without witches, and they are the most dangerous living creatures for children. (Dahl, 9).

In the first chapters of *The Witches*, we learn several things about the appearances of “REAL WITCHES”. They are bald, they have no toes, they have blue spit, slightly larger “nose-holes”, and they have claws instead of fingernails – but this is not exactly translated in the first illustration of a witch without her disguise. The claws and the bald head are present, as is the slightly larger nostrils, but we can also notice several other things: The witch has pointy, predator-like teeth and a long snake-like tongue. While many details in this illustration work to further Dahl's text, these two anomalies make their own contribution to the canon and create a disconnection between the information in the text



(Dahl 31)

and the illustrations. After reading *The Witches*, would one be incorrect to include the features portrayed in the illustrations when describing the witch?

5.1.1 Gender or no gender

As noted by previous research, many aspects of *The Witches* can be read as queer, most notably perhaps the narrator's transformation into a mouse. As previously suggested by Mitchell, the mouse can be read as a stand-in for gender, and thus a transition of sorts: he was a boy, now he is a mouse. Perhaps one can also see this through another queer lens: the rejecting of societal norms. The transformation entails the narrator leaving the expected path of growing up and becoming a contributing member of the heteronormative society – not only in terms of sexuality but on axes of identification mentioned by Jagose. By living out his days as a mouse the narrator is allowed to exist in a state of “anti”, free from expectations of any gender performance.

It is worth noting how the book is genderless for the first couple of chapters. Ignoring the illustrations, the text gives no clues as to whom the reader is following. However, it is no

surprise when the narrator is revealed to be male, perhaps due to the book being written like a fictional biography of Dahl since the narrator and the author share a Norwegian heritage.

The illustrations have from the beginning showed the narrator to be a little boy – with some ambiguity. The markers of gender presentation are vague at best: Blake’s illustrations are minimalistic, not very detailed, and quickly sketched. In picture 1, one can guess that the child might have a hat on, and perhaps a ruffled collar on a shirt/dress, but this style of drawing gives no clear answer. At the child’s elbow, there is one horizontal line drawn at the waist. A shirt, perhaps, but underneath the arm itself, there are four vertical lines, suggesting the gathered fabric of the skirt portion of a dress. One might get the impression that this child is indeed a girl based on their smile, as it is an encouraged gender performance for women, but there is no clear gender presentation in the image. In a comparison of picture one and two, the difference between the kids is not based on gender but rather on a person-to-person basis. Some have curly hair, some wear trousers. As Grandmamma calls her grandchild anything but a



(Picture 1, Dahl 8)



(Picture 2, Dahl 13)

name or a gendered nickname, sticking to neutral terms of endearment such as “my darling”, Dahl could have kept the narrator gender neutral – should he have wanted to. It would have been an interesting preface to the narrator ultimately ending up “genderless” – as a mouse.

5.1.2 The actual witches

Another ambiguity regarding gender performance is presented in the description of the witches, a passage that could be interpreted as a description of drag-queens. Dahl writes:

“I simply cannot tell you how *awful* they were, and somehow the whole sight was made more *grotesque* because underneath those *frightful* scabby bald heads, the bodies were dressed in fashionable and rather pretty clothes. It was *monstrous*. It was *unnatural*.” (Dahl 70, my italics)

It was “unnatural”, which we know from Jagose could be a signifier interpreted as queer. By wearing wigs and fashionable clothes in order to present as more female, one might draw parallels to drag queens, a practice which according to Jagose, “reinflects heterosexual norms within a gay context” (85). Through Dahl calling the witches “unnatural”, a connection to Butler is suggested. She argues that drag is not a parody, but rather “an effective cultural model for

deconstructing those commonly held assumptions that privilege certain genders and sexualities by attributing ‘natural-ness’ and ‘originality’ to them (86). She writes:

“As much as drag creates a unified picture of ‘woman’ ... it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency.” (Butler 175.)

Dahl presents the witches as women-but-not-women. They perform gender to fit into the society but might have become clichés of the intended gender (Butler, xxiv). Perhaps that is the reason for the witches’ portrayal not fully convincing the narrator – their way of performing gender has fallen into the category of uncanny.

When describing the witches, Dahl also adds “awful”, “grotesque”, “frightful”, and “monstrous”: adjectives to make the reader believe that these characters are the antagonists, and perhaps even painting them as being something other than human. However, if one looks closely at the illustrations by Quentin Blake, the witches look neither monstrous nor unnatural.



(Dahl 70)

The picture is showing a group of bald women, sitting in rows, several in the process of removing hats and wigs, others already bare-headed. If one were to change the setting to “Convention for Cancer Survivors”, the women in the illustration would not be described as “monstrous”, “unnatural”, or “grotesque”. Alas, they are witches who do not conform to the heteronormative standards of beauty when they are not in disguise, an identity which leads to adjectives such as “monstrous”. Marshall writes: “when a woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions” (464), something especially applicable to these not-women. They reject motherhood to the degree of becoming the children’s worst enemy.

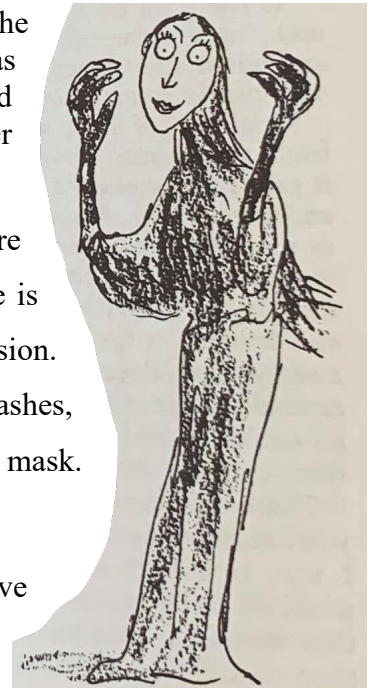
5.1.3 The Grand High Witch

While the masses of witches might not look that intimidating, one stands out: the Grand High Witch. Dahl writes:

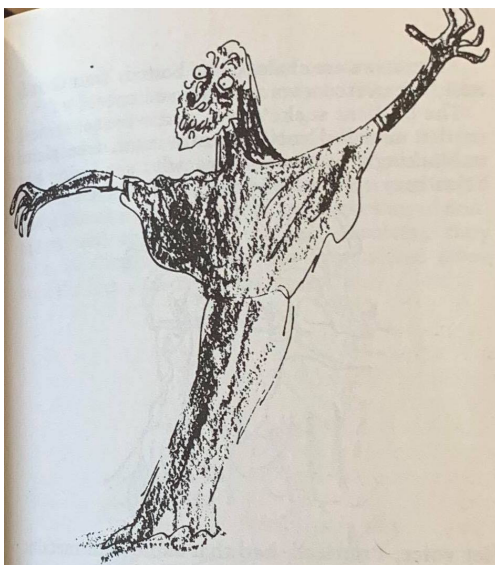
“She was tiny, probably no more than four and a half feet tall. She looked quite young, I guessed about twenty-five or six, and she was very pretty. She had on a rather stylish long black dress that reached right to the ground and she wore black gloves that came up to her elbows. Unlike the others, she wasn’t wearing a hat” (65).

Blake’s illustration does not stray far from the description. The picture shows a woman, standing with claw-like hands held up to her face. She is smiling, but her eyebrows are pointed down, giving her a menacing expression. Notably, this is the only character, female or not, illustrated with eyelashes, perhaps to exaggerate how unusually pretty she is, as the whole face is a mask. After the disguise is removed, Dahl continues describing the witch:

“The face of hers was the most *frightful* and *frightening* thing I have ever seen. Just looking at it gave me the shakes all over. It was so crumpled and wizened, so shrunken and shrivelled, it looked as though it had been pickled in vinegar. It was a *fearsome* and *ghastly* sight. There was something *terribly wrong* with it, something foul and putrid and decayed. It seemed quite literally to be rotting away at the edges, and in the middle of the face, around the mouth and cheeks, I could see the skin all cankered and worm-eaten, as though maggots were working away in there” (66, my italics)



(Dahl 65)



(Dahl 67)

Compared to the other witches, whose features could be read as signalling queerness, this character stands out. Worth noting is that through the unmasking of all witches and the pages thereafter, the Grand High Witch is continuously illustrated with long hair, something previously explained as impossible. Perhaps this witch is the opposite: a woman, performing as a witch.

Dahl uses several adjectives to underline the intimidation the character exudes, and Blake’s illustrations amplify the sentiment. The illustration is almost like rotten meat, keeping all focus on the Grand High Witch’s face. One difference between the two “faces” of the witch is her posture after revealing her true appearance. In disguise, she is standing up straight, with her hands to her face. After removing her mask, her arms are spread, and her posture gets more intimidating, almost threatening.

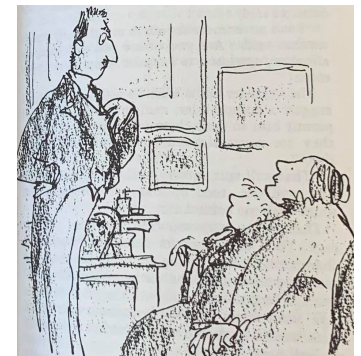
Granted, there is one aspect to the witches that Blake is unable to capture with static images – the eyes of the witches. Grandmamma explains that the pupils of a REAL WITCH change colour: “you will see fire and you will see ice dancing right in the very centre of the

coloured dot” (28-29). As Blake is restricted by black and white images printed on paper, one could not possibly see neither fire nor ice in these witches’ eyes. However, perhaps Blake has chosen to translate this feature to illustrations in other ways. The witches have a basic representation of an eye: a wide circle with a black dot. The eyes of our protagonists, however, are even simpler, represented by two black dots. This difference in how the eyes are drawn could be an important signal of a character’s personality.

When Grandmamma is sick, our narrator is looked after by the kind Mrs Spring. In the illustrations, her eyes are two black dots. At the hotel, the angry manager is unwilling to let the narrator keep his pet mice in the building but reluctantly agrees. His eyes are a circle and a dot. This becomes a tell-tale sign of a character’s nature – if the eyes are a circle with a dot, the character will not be likeable. Since Blake sets the precedent of these kinds of eyes belonging to witches, the illustrations go against the canon of witches being only women. As the text explicitly says, “there is no such thing as a male witch”, one might argue that through a queer lens, the illustration could be showing the manager to be a transsexual witch. However, since Bruno’s father is also depicted with these round eyes, the more plausible explanation might be that Blake uses these eyes to symbolise vicious, evil, or simply unpleasant characters. This observation proves true in *Matilda* as well, albeit with some exceptions.



(Dahl 49)



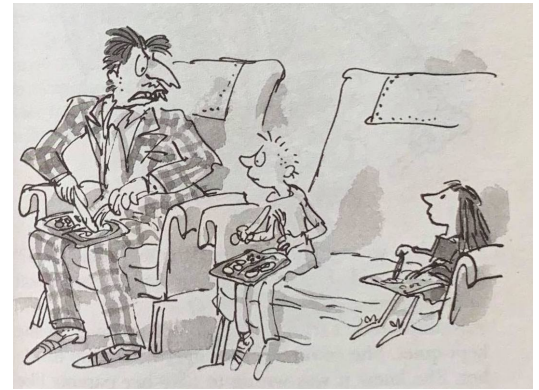
(Dahl 53)

5.2 Matilda

In *The Witches*, one can begin to map out an overlaying structure of Dahl and Blake’s relationship. One could also start to make several assumptions regarding some of Blake’s stylistic choices and the connection between bad characters being ugly and queer coded, and good characters being beautiful and heteronormative. However, in *Matilda* (1988), this theory of good/bad corresponding to heteronormative/queer gets murkier – another ambiguity is presented. Miss Trunchbull, the obvious antagonist, is illustrated as masculine, broad-shouldered and mean-looking. But *Matilda*’s mother, Mrs Wormwood, is arguably both an antagonist and heteronormative.

5.2.1 The Wormwoods.

When Matilda's father is introduced, the reader learns the following: "Mr Wormwood was a small ratty-looking man whose front teeth stuck out underneath a thin ratty moustache. He liked to wear jackets with large brightly coloured checks and he sported ties that were usually yellow or pale green" (17).

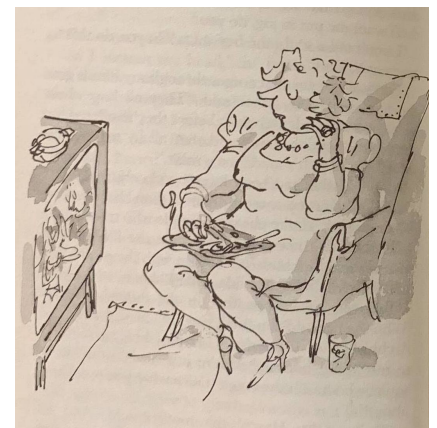


(Dahl 21)

Four pages later Blake introduces us to the character. Sitting in a chair in front of the tv, the man is cutting up food on the tray in his lap as he's looking to his side. His mouth is pointed downwards and his eyebrow signals anger. While "ratty" is a subjective descriptor, the man's teeth do stick out and the moustache is just a thin, squiggly line over his upper lip. However, due to Dahl's description only regarding the overall appearance, details are left up to Blake's imagination. This could be why Mr Wormwood is pictured with a large nose and unkempt hair, as it might be Blake's interpretation of "ratty". As for his size, Mr Wormwood seems to be of normal stature in comparison to the chair he is sitting in. Perhaps a bit thin, but with large hands and broad shoulders.

This illustration offers another piece of information: as mentioned previously in the analysis of *The Witches*, one can observe the eyes of the family illustrated. Matilda is the only one having the small, simplified dot for eyes. The rest of the family are shown to have the circles with a dot, something *The Witches* proved could be connected to characters with a wicked streak.

Unlike her husband, Mrs Wormwood is described on the same spread as her first illustration. Dahl explains that she is "a large woman whose hair was dyed platinum blonde except where you could see the mousy-brown bits growing out from the roots. She wore heavy make-up and she had one of those unfortunate bulging figures where the flesh appears to be strapped in all around the body to prevent it from falling out" (21). In picture one notices several deviations from the text. Her mousy-brown roots are not apparent, and by reading the description one might get the impression that



(Dahl 20)

Mrs Wormwood is rather obese. The woman depicted, however, is not. Interestingly, while Mr Wormwood, a "small" man, is hovering about a fourth of a head above the back of the chair, Mrs Wormwood, "large", is only reaching the top of the back of the chair with the top of her head. This height difference is aligned with a heteronormative expectation of gendered size.

What one could interpret from how Dahl describes Mrs Wormwood is the same suspected misogyny that was found in *The Witches*. The description could be interpreted as rather harsh, calling her “unfortunate” – one gets the impression Mrs Wormwood is mocked by Dahl for not performing gender “the right way”. Furthermore, the parents of Matilda are described as “gormless” and “so wrapped up in their own silly little lives that they failed to notice anything about their daughter.” Matilda’s brilliance was so exceptional that it “should have been obvious even to the half-witted of parents” (4), which leads us to believe Dahl thinks of Mr and Mrs Wormwood as less than half-witted. This is interesting because he attributes several misogynistic opinions to the pair, thus connecting half-wittedness with misogyny.

Mrs Wormwood is presented as a mild antagonist, showing occasional kindness and parental concern for Matilda, values expected from a heteronormative woman. Furthermore, she is shown to align herself with conservative values such as the importance of the nuclear family. When Miss Honey, Matilda’s teacher, visits to try to implore the promises of Matilda’s education, Mrs Wormwood is strongly against the idea of higher education. “A girl should think about making herself look attractive so she can get a good husband later on. Looks is [*sic!*] more important than books”, she says (Dahl 91). In this sentence, Mrs Wormwood seems to show contempt for women like Miss Honey – employed, unmarried and without makeup – and does not want that future for her daughter.

‘Now look at *me*,’ Mrs Wormwood said. ‘then look at *you*. You chose books. I chose looks.’ Miss Honey looked at the plain plump person with the smug suet-pudding face who was sitting across the room. ‘What did you say?’ she asked.

‘I said you chose books and I chose looks,’ Mrs Wormwood said. ‘And who’s finished up the better off? Me, of course. I’m sitting pretty in a nice house with a successful businessman and you’re left slaving away teaching a lot of nasty little children the ABC.’ (Dahl 91–92)

Despite Dahl’s suspected misogyny, this passage shows him aligning those heteronormative values and gender codes with an antagonist. A reader would not find Mrs Wormwood relatable, and thus, her values are not the values shown by the “good guys”. Of course, Mrs Wormwood is more complicated than a proper antagonist, but she is shown to align herself with the villains in the book. Her view of marriage might perhaps be “compulsory heterosexuality”, which Jagose explains as heterosexuality might not being “a matter of personal choice”, but a “regulatory order” that is “identifying heterosexuality as ‘a *political institution*’ which systematically works to the disadvantage of all women” (53). This unfair power balance opens for the comparison of heterosexuality with other patriarchal structures.

This could be observed in the relationship between the Wormwoods, which although shown to be highly valued, is problematic. Despite Mrs Wormwood telling Miss Honey that a girl should focus on her appearance in order to get herself a spouse, she does not seem to be pleased with her own. In several instances, the reader is privy to Mrs Wormwood's thoughts about the relationship. When Mr Wormwood has glued a hat to his head, she looks at him and thinks he looks stupid. Blake illustrates her looking rather miserable while the text explains her to thinking that Mr Wormwood is "hardly the kind of man a wife dreams about" (29).

When one contrasts these situations to the sentiment told to Miss Honey, one gets the impression that Mrs Wormwood might not be the antagonist she is set out to be. Rather, she seems trapped in a marriage she might not be overall satisfied with. If she was told during her childhood that it was important to marry, she might not have had the opportunity for higher education. Perhaps this has internalized into a misogynistic way of thinking, presenting itself as living what Dahl calls a "silly little life". The unhappy marriage is almost a heteronormative trope at this time, the oxymoron of being something that one should strive for yet a source of misery. As Jagose explains it: "Homosexuality was represented as an identity repressed by heterosexist power structures which privilege gender-asymmetry, sexual reproduction and the patriarchal nuclear family" (36).

Upon closer analysis, it seems like Mrs Wormwood is a victim of womanhood. After having kids and growing older, one could interpret her as feeling as though she is losing the femininity that the media around her highly values. Ahmed (2010) states:

"Surely there are many women [...] who are happy at the moment as housewives, and some whose abilities are fully used in the housewife role. But happiness is not the same thing as aliveness of being fully used. [...] The concept of aliveness is held up as an alternative social value to happiness. Indeed, Friedan argues that women who can fit the image of the happy housewife are the ones who are more likely to adjust to this role and who then give up – without any conscious act of sacrifice – other opportunities for 'finding yourself'." (79)

The greatest sin of Mr and Mrs Wormwood might be their inadequate parenting. In the last chapter, when the Wormwoods quickly pack to escape criminal prosecution, Miss Honey asks to take Matilda. She says that while she would love to adopt Matilda, she wants their consent first (233).

‘Come on, Harry,’ the mother said, pushing a suitcase into the back seat. ‘Why don’t we let her go if that’s what she wants? It’ll be one less to look after.’

‘I’m in a hurry,’ the father said. ‘I’ve got a plane to catch. If she wants to stay, let her stay. It’s fine with me.’

Matilda leapt into Miss Honey’s arms and hugged her, and Miss Honey hugged her back, and then the mother and father and brother were inside the car and the car was pulling away with the tyres screaming. The brother gave a wave through the rear window, but the other two didn’t even look back. (Dahl 233)

Several interesting things can be noted about this passage. Firstly, there is no challenge to the idea of leaving Matilda behind. Secondly, the passage is written in almost a stream of consciousness, echoed by the illustration, relaying a sense of urgency and stress to the reader. Thirdly, the only characters who are referenced by name are Matilda and Miss Honey. Dahl avoids the names of the three others – rather, he calls them “the mother” and “father” and “brother”, as if to underline their biological connection to Matilda. Perhaps this linguistic choice is done to further the “horror” of the act of leaving her, and the failings of the heteronormative ideal: the nuclear family. There is no familiarity in how Mr Wormwood speaks: *He* is in a hurry; *he* has to catch a plane. Matilda is certainly not included in those plans, and if one of the other family members were delayed, we cannot be certain that they would be included either. In the illustrations, Matilda has already been united with her “real” family – in a comparison of the characters, the child bears more resemblance to Miss Honey than her biological family.



(Dahl 231 – 232)



(Dahl 234)

5.2.2 Miss Honey

While Matilda's parents might not be her biggest supporters, Dahl makes it clear that there are a few characters on the protagonist's side. One of them is the aforementioned teacher, Miss Honey.

“The teacher was called Miss Honey, and she could not have been more than twenty-three or twenty-four. She had a lovely pale 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 60)

A few pages into the chapter “Miss Honey”, the reader gets to see the teacher pictured for the first time. Holding a stack of books, she is handing one out to a receiving student while looking in the other direction. It seems she is in the middle of talking, with an open mouth with a slightly upward turn, and eyes focused on another student. In the illustration, one gets the impression that she is tall, but that could be influenced by her being surrounded by children. Miss Honey looks to be thin with broad shoulders, a common feature



(Dahl 62)

of Blake's illustrations. Notably, this character is one of few that is described in detail, having an “oval” face and “blue eyes”. While the eye colour is not applicable in these black and white images, the oval face has been translated into the illustration and given a pointed chin.

One of the few things Blake has added to the character is her glasses, which is not mentioned by Dahl. There is an agreement between text and illustration, and the illustrations do not contradict, but rather expand the information – although the images are subjective in how a “madonna face” should look. Miss Honey is almost perceived as being saint-like, which suggests the parallel of her being the “madonna” in a madonna/whore-complex. Due to her vanity, Mrs Wormwood could be seen as the whore: the opposite of Miss Honey's innocence and pure mind. This contrast reproduces the binary of a heteronormative world and applies the same framework within one singular gender.

Miss Honey is illustrated three more times in that chapter. Keeping her thin stature, the most discernable feature added is her lips. She is one of few characters illustrated with this feature, and unlike Mrs Wormwood, who is described as using make-up, one suspects Miss Honey of

being bare-faced. Perhaps this is a subliminal message of womanhood: Mrs Wormwood, whose femininity is both precious and important to her, uses make-up to achieve it. Miss Honey, however, is described as a “madonna”, has a femininity that comes naturally to her and thus needs not to turn to make-up to achieve feminine features.

Furthermore, Miss Honey possesses several important characteristics for a woman. She is described as a “mild and quiet person who never raised her voice”, but despite this, she “was seldom seen to smile” (60-61). This is interesting, as in three of the four illustrations of Miss Honey in that chapter she is shown with the corners of her lips turned up. The statement is contradicted even in the text – not long after Miss Honey’s description, the reader learns that “once again she smiled. It was a much broader one this time, a smile of pure pleasure.”



(Dahl 65)



(Dahl 69)



(Dahl 74)

5.2.3 Miss Trunchbull

Comparingly, Miss Trunchbull is introduced to the reader as “a formidable middle-aged lady” (60), an adjective that will show up again later. The emphasis put on “formidable” suggests her position as an antagonist to Matilda, and the text offers more clues to support this. In the chapter about Miss Honey, almost 20 pages before the reader “meets” Miss Trunchbull, Dahl gives this preview:

“She was a gigantic holy terror, a fierce tyrannical monster who frightened the life out of pupils and teachers alike. There was an aura of menace about her even at a distance, and when she came up close you could almost feel the dangerous heat radiating from her as from a red-hot rod of metal.” (61)

This builds the legend of Miss Trunchbull with carefully chosen words such as “gigantic holy terror”, “a fierce tyrannical monster”, “an aura of menace”, “dangerous heat radiating from her”. When left with no underlying reason for this type of description, the reader could easily perceive her as this great bad guy. This antagonist is so extreme, Dahl calls her “almost impossible to describe”, and must wait a couple of pages before trying. (61). When a description of Miss Trunchbull does arrive, it is a lengthy one:

“She was above all a most *formidable female*. She had once been a famous athlete, and even now the muscles were still clearly in evidence. You could see them in the bull-neck, in the big shoulders, in the thick arms, in the sinewy wrists and in the powerful legs. Looking at her, you got the feeling that this was someone who could bend iron bars and tear telephone directories in half. Her face, I’m afraid, was *neither a thing of beauty nor a joy* for ever. She had an *obstinate* chin, a *cruel* mouth and small *arrogant* eyes. And as for her clothes ... they were, to say the least, *extremely odd*. She always had on a brown cotton smock which was pinched in around the waist with a wide leather belt. The belt was fastened in front with an enormous silver buckle. The massive thighs which emerged from out of the smock were encased in a pair of extraordinary breeches, bottle-green in colour and made of coarse twill. These breeches reached to just below the knees and from there on down she sported green stockings with turn-up tops, which displayed her calf muscles *to perfection*. On her feet she wore flat-heeled brown brogues with leather flaps. She looked, in short, more like a rather *eccentric* and *bloodthirsty* follower of the stag-hounds than the headmistress of a nice school for children.” (Dahl 76–77, my italics)

This is contrasted to how a headteacher usually is: “most head teachers are chosen because they possess a number of fine qualities. They understand children and they have the children’s best interest at heart. They are sympathetic. They are fair and they are deeply interested in education. Miss Trunchbull possessed none of these qualities and how she ever got her present job was a mystery” (76).

This passage is interesting because Miss Trunchbull’s description focuses mainly on her appearance. There is little connection with those fine qualities that a headteacher usually possesses, with two small exceptions; once when the text explicitly states it and once when Dahl writes that simply by “looking at her, you got the feeling that this was someone who could bend iron bars and tear telephone directories in half”. The rest of her description goes into unusually close details of her muscles, clothing, and the overall impression she leaves.

A few pages later, the reader sees Miss Trunchbull for the first time. She is depicted standing with one hand on her hip and the other one in a fist resting on the table, seemingly in a pose of authority and intimidation - traits usually assigned to a masculine disposition. Miss Trunchbull looks straight at the reader, with her eyebrows in a downward position as well as



(Dahl 78)

her mouth, or as Dahl describes it: “a look of scowling impatience on her face” (77). The room looks dimly lit, casting shadows on half of her face, perhaps a stylistic choice by Blake to further the villainous impression of the character. She is of broader stature and has big hands. Judging by the details of the room she is standing in and due to details given in the text – “[...] Miss Trunchbull was standing beside her huge desk [...]” (77) – she looks to be a tall woman. The clothing seems to match what Dahl describes: she has a dress on, with a wide belt keeping her waist in.

Similar to the narrative in *The Witches*, using words such as “frightful” or “monstrous”, Dahl chooses to describe Miss Trunchbull as “bloodthirsty”, “cruel”, “obstinate”. Not even Mr Wormwood, an actual criminal, is connected to such harsh words. Mr Wormwood is “ratty”, at the most extreme. Perhaps this is done to signal that Miss Trunchbull has reached a higher level of villainy – maybe because she operates on an evil yet lawful plane, and maybe because she is not expected to be evil. She is a head-teacher, and those are “sympathetic”. Miss Trunchbull fits the description of neither headteacher nor woman.

In contrast with Miss Honey’s “madonna”, “lovely”, and “mild”, it is clear Miss Trunchbull is the gothic character in the mix. However, not even Miss Honey is treated to superlatives such as “perfection”, or “extraordinary”, which surprisingly Miss Trunchbull is. Dahl goes as far as describing the headteacher to be “above all a most formidable female”. While “formidable” carries a negative connotation, a feeling of conflict or someone being an opponent, Dahl still underlines her femininity. This is an interesting first sentence to the following description hinting at her masculine qualities. Perhaps Dahl is, rather than excluding, *including* Miss Trunchbull to be feminine in her own way. Oddly dressed, masculine, lacking the usual caring traits ascribed to women, but still a woman. This can also be seen some pages further back when Dahl postpones her description: “This woman, in all her eccentricities and in her appearance, is almost impossible to describe [...]” (60). This sentence is almost turning Miss Trunchbull into a *thing*, so far from normal she is almost impossible to describe, but all the while maintaining her womanhood. This would align with ideas suggested by Butler: “Gender can be rendered ambiguous without disturbing or reorienting normative sexuality at all” (XIV)

Miss Trunchbull is a woman, but nevertheless a woman so deviant, one should be grateful she belongs to a minority:

“Thank goodness we don’t meet many people like her in this world, although they do exist and all of us are likely to come across at least one of them in a lifetime. If you ever do, you should behave as you would if you met an enraged rhinoceros out in the bush – climb up the nearest tree and stay there until it has gone away.” (Dahl 61)

This seems to be a reference back to Dahl’s earlier book *The Witches*. Even the way of dealing with a person like Miss Trunchbull rings similar to how the main character in *The Witches* handles his first encounter with a witch – namely by climbing further up a tree and staying there until his grandmamma says it is safe to come down. This reference to witches makes the description of Miss Trunchbull unsurprising. Just like Miss Trunchbull, the witches are described as unfeminine and unnatural to their gender. However, while the witches might look like any woman when they’re in disguise, Miss Trunchbull’s “face, I’m afraid, was neither a thing of beauty nor a joy for ever” (77). The structure of this sentence does suggest that, unlike the witches, Miss Trunchbull is only a woman, which makes her ugliness a discredit to her gender. The sentence seems to read: “unfortunately, she is ugly”.

Miss Trunchbull personifies something very interesting in the book: internalized misogyny. During a conversation regarding Matilda, she says to Miss Honey:

“[...] a bad girl is a far more dangerous creature than a bad boy. What’s more, they’re much harder to squash. Squashing a bad girl is like trying to squash a bluebottle. You bang down on it and the darn thing isn’t there. Nasty dirty things, little girls are. Glad I never was one.” (Dahl, 80)

When challenged, she clarifies that she “[...] became a woman very quickly” (80). The sentence “becoming a woman” is sometimes synonymous with a sexual debut, opening the door for suspicion as to what this sentence truly means. However, in this reading, the sentence will be interpreted as distancing herself from femininity. It can be read as she was never concerned with frivolous things such as prepubescent interests, but perhaps rather kept a focus on her career in sports. In the text, both Miss Trunchbull and Mrs Wormwood show signs of internalized misogyny, which is not easily translatable to illustration. Perhaps that is one of the reasons Blake chooses to portray them as awkward women.

6. Conclusion

This essay has analysed the relationship between the illustrations and text in Dahl's books *The Witches* and *Matilda* from a queer perspective. The analysis has found that when reading these books through a queer perspective, it becomes clear that Dahl's binary categorising seems to align bad characters with queer descriptors and good characters with a heteronormative. Queer characteristics are repeatedly given to antagonists, but it is important to recognize that it is not always echoed in Blake's illustrations. In several cases, the illustrations were found to exaggerate or add details, the greatest example of this being the added fangs on the witches – a seemingly inconspicuous detail but instrumental in the level of horror perceived, as well as their gender presentation. Thus, Blake plays an instrumental role in how gender is perceived in these books. Established early on, while these illustrations are only one interpretation of many, Blake's illustrations are the canonical version, approved by Dahl. Of course, this entails two sets of underlying opinions, biases, and preconceptions.

Ultimately, the book can be separated into three different versions of the story: the text alone, the illustrations alone, and the text in relation to the illustrations. All of these tell slightly different stories, and while the text-only is viable on its own, the illustrations are dependent on the text for context. The version most authentic to Dahl's intentions is the text-only, but it is the opinion of this author that the version of the story most rich in detail is the illustrated one. That said, more often than not, the issue of heteronormative, queer coded characters and gender performative is more nuanced than static images and text could portray, and there are several times where Blake has both amplified as well as lessened these issues present in the text.

Overall, there is an overwhelmingly female cast in both books, which does present the opportunity for all kinds of gender performance. Going forward, a suggestion for further study is to do a broader study into the relationship between illustrations and text by Roald Dahl and Quentin Blake. This essay has shown that there is motivation to broaden the analysis and look for patterns in both Blake's illustrations and Dahl's text and that such an analysis is a fruitful one to make. It would certainly be interesting to see if the pair has common heteronormative tropes they fall into, and thus gaining a bigger understanding of the underlying messages in these well-read children's classics.

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