

Trinity College

Trinity College Digital Repository

Senior Theses and Projects

Student Scholarship

Spring 2023

Gender Stereotypes and Representation of Women in Roald Dahl's Books

Sarah Hunt
shunt3@trincoll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hunt, Sarah, "Gender Stereotypes and Representation of Women in Roald Dahl's Books". Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2023.

Trinity College Digital Repository, <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/1025>

Gender Stereotypes and Representation of Women in Roald Dahl's Books

Sarah Hunt

Department of Educational Studies, Trinity College

May 2023

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the role and representation of women in Roald Dahl's children's novels. To do this, I conducted a document analysis of five of Dahl's books - "James and the Giant Peach" (1961), "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" (1964), "Danny, The Champion of the World" (1975), "The Witches" (1983), and "Matilda" (1988) - in order to answer the following questions: How does Roald Dahl portray women and girls in his novels? What gendered stereotypes are present, and how does this portrayal change over time? I was able to answer this question through utilizing a feminist literary criticism approach. By using texts such as Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex", I was able to frame my analysis of gender stereotyping and the creation of an image of gender in Dahl's books. In conducting this study, I found that Roald Dahl crafts an image of what a woman is using gendered stereotypes and specific narratives. While overt stereotyping lessens over time and Dahl portrays some overt feminist ideas in his later work, his subtle dictation of what a good woman is and what a bad woman is endures throughout his entire career as a children's author.

Introduction

Research has shown time and time again that children's books play a central role in "the acquisition and development of societal attitudes"¹. As educators we know the importance of considering the hidden curriculum² present in the books we give our students, and are constantly striving to create a more equitable environment for all of our students. Considering the messaging and social influences books and authors have on children is especially important in

¹ Casey K, Novick K, Lourenco SF (2021) Sixty years of gender representation in children's books: Conditions associated with overrepresentation of male versus female protagonists. PLoS ONE 16(12): e0260566. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0260566>

² Henry A. Giroux & Anthony N. Penna (1979) Social Education in the Classroom: The Dynamics of the Hidden Curriculum, *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 7:1, 21-42, DOI: 10.1080/00933104.1979.10506048

this time of heated debate about banning certain books in schools.³ That is why, for my thesis, I will be examining the works of prominent children's author Roald Dahl. He is one of the most famous children's authors of his time, as well as in the present with a lasting legacy on people both young and old.

His works have long since been critiqued and at times banned, with his book "The Witches" holding the 22nd spot on the American Library Association's list of most banned/challenged books from 1990 to 1999.⁴ Recently his work is being discussed again as the publishers of Dahl's work are censoring or removing certain language from the books in new reprints. For example, words such as "fat" being replaced with "enormous." Entire sentences are being added as well with NPR stating that "In his 1983 book *The Witches*, he writes that witches are bald beneath their wigs..an added line in new editions says, "There are plenty of other reasons why women might wear wigs and there is certainly nothing wrong with that."⁵ Seeing all of this conversation around Dahl's works, especially discussions about and changes to his writing of women, coupled with my interest in the subject of female representation in curriculum, I feel there is a need to examine Roald Dahl's books through a feminist lens. Therefore, the purpose of this research study is to explore, through a feminist lens, the representation of women and girls in Roald Dahl's children's books. A feminist lens allows for the analysis of the representation of women and girls and the ways women and girls are presented, stereotyped, and viewed through the patriarchal gaze, as well as gender roles they are given.

³ Friedman, Jonathan, Farid Johnson, Nadine, "Banned in the USA: The Growing Movement to Censor Books in Schools." Pen America 100, 2022.

⁴ "Roald Dahl." The Banned Book Brigade, 2016.

<https://bannedbookbrigade.wordpress.com/tag/roald-dahl/#:~:text=Like%20James%20and%20the%20Giant.of%20most%20banned%2Fchallenged%20books.>

⁵ Diaz, Jaclyn, "Changes to new editions of Roald Dahl books have readers up in arms." NPR, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/21/1158347261/roald-dahl-books-changed-offensive-words>

With all of this in mind, I ask this research question: How does Roald Dahl portray women and girls in his novels? What gendered stereotypes are present, and how, if at all, does this portrayal change over time? Asking these questions will not only give us a better picture through which to discuss the appropriateness of Dahl's works in curriculum, but also lend itself to the ongoing debates and discussions about his work in a more general context.

By using feminist literary criticism as my lens through which to examine Dahl's work, I am able to analyze his texts and their possible impacts in a new and unique way. While there has been previous work related to Dahl and gender, including pieces like "Roald Dahl ed. By Ann Alston and Catherine Butler."⁶ This work has been done mainly on one or two novels at a time instead of the span of Dahl's career. They are also pieces which argue for or against Dahl's portrayal of women and traditional beliefs or stereotypes. However, there is a gap in the research in terms of unbiasedly identifying all stereotypes about women broadly across all of Dahl's works and how these attitudes change throughout his novels. This is the area I identified as missing and therefore wanted to focus on. While using feminist criticism, which is "Based on the premise that social systems are patriarchal—organized to privilege men—it seeks to trace how such power relations in society are reflected, supported, or questioned by literary texts and expression."⁷ I am able to create an unbiased catalog of Dahl's creation of the image of women and his usage of stereotypes. Using this framework and developing codes through which to analyze Dahl's works is pertinent to understanding and having discussions around gender representation and stereotypes in prominent children's literature, and how it subsequently impacts children's perceptions of gender and gender roles.

⁶ McClelland, J. B. (2013). Roald Dahl ed. by Ann Alston and Catherine Butler. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 38(3), 368-369.

⁷ Mambrol, Nasrullah "Feminist Literary Criticism." 2022.
<https://literariness.org/2022/10/07/feminist-literary-criticism/>

Literature Review

Historical Context

Roald Dahl is one of the main figures in children's literature, and much is known about his life thanks to a biography entitled "Storyteller: The Authorized Biography of Roald Dahl" by Donald Sturrock. In this novel we learn key aspects of Dahl's life, many relating to gender, with Sturrock stating that "Roald himself was blessed with an extraordinarily strong and influential Norwegian mother, who single-handedly raised him and did much to shape his attitudes"⁸. Dahl goes even further when describing his mother's influence, with the biography stating, "he described her as undoubtedly the primary influence on my own life."⁹ Subsequently, he was the only son in an all female family, with his father dying when he was only three years old. Though he did attend a (particularly punitive and draconian) boarding school from a young age.¹⁰ This early life context of Dahl's life may give us some insight into the way he writes and portrays women.

In terms of the historical context surrounding Dahl's own life, he was a fighter pilot in the second world war, then a wartime diplomat in Washington before becoming a children's author later in life.¹¹ In terms of social movements and phenomena surrounding his time, as a piece by Beverley Pennell about Dahl's work describes, "the significant aspects of his cultural context include the reconceptualisation of childhood that occurs in the second half of the twentieth century and the challenge second-wave feminism poses to the traditional western gender order that occurs from the late nineteen-fifties onwards."¹² Dahl grew up and became an adult in a time

⁸ Sturrock Donald "Storyteller: The Authorized Biography of Roald Dahl." McClelland & Stewart 2010. p. 44

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 49

¹¹ Ibid, p. 2

¹² Pennell, B. (2012). 'When one is with her it is impossible to be bored': An examination of Roald Dahl's contribution to a feminist project in children's literature. In A. Alston, & C. Butler (Eds.), Roald Dahl (pp. 102-122). (New casebooks). Palgrave Macmillan.

where second wave feminism was changing the makeup of society in major ways. He was also writing his children's books in America during this time where the movement of second wave feminism was especially present. These cultural contexts are particularly relevant when we speak about gender in Dahl's works when we consider this historical backdrop of second wave feminism.

Dahl is undoubtedly one of the most famous figures in children's literature to this day. For example, in 2012 he was voted the favorite author of primary school teachers.¹³ His bestselling books have sold more than 250 million copies, with *Matilda* alone selling 17 million copies.¹⁴ It is clear that he is a cultural mainstay in children's literature, and his works are prevalent in children's early literacy experiences. This popularity and prevalence makes Dahl a particularly important figure to examine in terms of representation in his works, as his interpretations reach millions of children.

Stereotypes

Harmful representation and stereotyping of marginalized groups in children's literature is a much discussed topic amongst scholars, with race and gender being some of the main issues at hand. When it comes to representation of African American people in children's literature, "the depictions are stereotyped, pejorative, and unauthentic."¹⁵

The other large piece of representation discussed in literature is that of gender. When it comes to the broader history of gender representation and its impacts, sources such as this piece by Lewis entitled "What Might Books Be Teaching Young Children About Gender?"¹⁶ gives us

¹³ Chilton, Martin. "Roald Dahl Voted Teachers' Favourite Author." *The Telegraph* 12 Mar. 2012.

¹⁴ McLoughlin Danny "Roald Dahl Statistics." 2022. <https://wordrated.com/roald-dahl-statistics/>

¹⁵ Harris, V. J. (1990). African American Children's Literature: The First One Hundred Years. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 59(4), 540–555. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2295311>

¹⁶ Lewis, M., Cooper Borkenhagen, M., Converse, E., Lupyan, G., & Seidenberg, M. S. (2022). What Might Books Be Teaching Young Children About Gender? *Psychological Science*, 33(1), 33–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976211024643>

insight into the history of gender bias in children's novels through a comprehensive study of 247 popular contemporary children's novels, scanning them for gendered language and stereotypes. Lewis states that "children's books contain many words that adults judge as gendered. Semantic analyses based on co-occurrence data yielded word clusters related to gender stereotypes (e.g., feminine: emotions; masculine: tools)."¹⁷ Additional research from people like Casey Novick about gender representation in children's literature over the last 60 years also gives us some figures about male versus female representation in children's novels throughout the past sixty years.¹⁸ This not only gives us metrics about the continuation of gendered stereotypes and general lack of female protagonists, it also lets us compare the metrics of the time Roald Dahl was writing into the data I find in my research.

This history of stereotyped representation is important because it affects how children perceive, perform and interpret gender and gender roles. In a piece entitled "Gender Issues in Young Children's Literature", the author states that "Gender bias as portrayed in children's literature is still as prevalent today as in past decades."¹⁹ This prevalence of gendered stereotypes matters because "gender stereotypes and sexism in children's picture books affect the development of gender identity in young children."²⁰ Children extract meaning from children's novels and apply that to their own social contexts. With all of this in mind, it is imperative that we interrogate and examine how gender is represented in children's literature, especially in world famous works such as Roald Dahl's infamous pieces.

Conceptual Framework

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Casey K, Novick K, Lourenco SF (2021) Sixty years of gender representation in children's books: Conditions associated with overrepresentation of male versus female protagonists. PLoS ONE 16(12): e0260566. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0260566>

¹⁹ Tsao, Y. (2008). Gender Issues in Young Children's Literature. Reading Improvement, 45, 108.

²⁰ Ibid.

Because Dahl's impact on children is so large as a mainstay figure in children's literature, and because stereotypes of gender are continuously so prevalent in children's literature, it is only right to examine Dahl's works through a critical feminist perspective. Feminist criticism is described as focusing on "...the role of women (or gender) in a literary text. According to feminist criticism, patriarchy, in its masculine-focused structure, socially dictates the norms for both men and women. Feminist criticism is useful for analyzing how gender itself is socially constructed for both men and women."²¹ Using this framework to look for and examine gendered stereotypes as well as how women and girls are portrayed is the main aim of my thesis. Through this framework I was able to create codes such as Gendered Language (GEN LANG) and Stereotypes (STEREO) which recognized stereotypes fought against in feminism such as being quiet and submissive, not working outside the home, mothering instinct etc., In terms of building on this framework through which to examine Dahl, there are plenty of scholarly works from which I have pulled in order to inform the theoretical framework and code book which I will use to examine Dahl's works. In a piece entitled "Representations of the Monstrous-Feminine in Selected Works of CS Lewis, Roald Dahl and Philip Pullman"²² I am able to extract frameworks to examine Dahl through - such as the framework of "Monstrous Feminine" versus the more Freudian stereotype of the "Nurturing Mother" which appear in Dahl's works. Additionally, in pieces such as "Girl Power: An Exploration of the Female Characters in Roald Dahl's Fiction"²³, we see an examination of female characters in Dahl's works and a defense of his representation of women. This is a piece which is in direct conversation with mine, as they discuss the

²¹ Eward-Mangione, Angela, "Feminist Criticism." Writing Commons. <https://writingcommons.org/section/research/research-methods/textual-methods/literary-criticism/feminist-criticism/>

²² Anna Wing Bo Tso "Representations of the Monstrous-Feminine in Selected Works of C. S. Lewis, Roald Dahl and Philip Pullman." <https://hrcak.srce.hr/clanak/147117>

²³ Berg, C. van den "Girl Power: An Exploration of the Female Characters in Roald Dahl's Fiction." Utrecht University, 2013. <https://studenttheses.uu.nl/handle/20.500.12932/15029>

versatility of Dahl's female characters and argue that Dahl's female characters are "certainly more diverse than the typical female characters in children's literature."²⁴ By examining Dahl's work through a feminist lens of stereotypes and the norms present for men and women, I will be testing the ideas of this author in some regards. Lastly, this piece entitled "Content Analysis and Gender Stereotypes in Children's Books"²⁵ which is about gender stereotypes in children's literature and how to critically analyze them using Dahl as an example, is also a piece which is critical to building my framework and codebook.

None of the pieces that I have come across use feminist criticism²⁶ specifically as their theory through which to examine a sample of Dahl's works throughout his career. With this prior literature we are able to see the previous conversations as well as previous work examining Dahl's work from a historical lens. My research will contribute a specific examination of multiple works by Dahl through a feminist lens in order to examine the specific ways girls and women are represented and constructed. These works are *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *Danny, The Champion of the World* (1975), *The Witches* (1983), and *Matilda* (1988). My work is also examining how Dahl's representation of women and girls changed over time as Dahl continued publishing books from 1961 to 1988. This type of examination is not something that has been examined in depth by any of the research I have come across.

Methods

This research project was a qualitative study on the works of famed children's author Roald Dahl. For my methods, I analyzed prior literature on Roald Dahl's representation of

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Taylor, Frank. "Content Analysis and Gender Stereotypes in Children's Books." *Teaching Sociology*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2003, pp. 300–11. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3211327>. Accessed 7 May 2023.

²⁶ Eward-Mangione, Angela, "Feminist Criticism." *Writing Commons*. <https://writingcommons.org/section/research/research-methods/textual-methods/literary-criticism/feminist-criticism/>

women and girls in his novels. I then analyzed a selection of Dahl's work which is representative of his career from beginning to end with my lens of analysis being gender representation. The books I selected to analyze are *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *Danny, The Champion of the World* (1975), *The Witches* (1983), and *Matilda* (1988). These book's release dates reflect a period in time where, socially, many movements for women's rights were making significant gains such as the Equal Pay Act in 1964, *Roe v Wade* in 1973, as well as the Women's Educational Equity Act in 1974. Therefore these books not only represent the length of Dahl's career as a children's author but are also published at the same time as these major social movements in feminism in the United States, where Dahl lived when he wrote the majority of these novels.

This method of literary analysis is appropriate for my topic because it enables me to use a conceptual framework to analyze Dahl's works in the most effective way possible. In using both prior literature on Dahl as well as on gender representation in children's novels, I am able to create a conceptual framework with which to analyze Dahl's novels in order to answer my research question. One limitation of my methods is that since I am not interviewing or surveying anyone, I cannot ask follow up questions to text and therefore some other perspectives about how the representation can be interpreted may be lost. I have to be very careful to keep the framework I use to analyze gender in these novels as subjective as possible.

Participants

My "participants" or rather my pieces of data are the novels I have chosen which best represent Dahl's entire novelistic career. They are "*James and The Giant Peach*" (1961), "*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*" (1964), "*Danny, The Champion of the World*" (1975), "*The Witches*" (1983), and "*Matilda*" (1988). I primarily selected these novels because they most evenly span

the entirety of his career in children's literature. However, I also chose these novels in particular because they either include the most female characters, or they specifically have a lack in female characters. I also wanted to include all of his most popular works²⁷ in order to analyze the works which would be read by the most children, while also choosing works which included similar male and female protagonists in order to assess their differences in representation fairly. This selection of books is the appropriate sample because it properly represents the span of Roald Dahl's children's literature career time wise, and it also includes his most popular pieces. I chose these particular books by taking into account the date as well as popularity of the piece in order to span his entire career evenly as well as read his well known pieces while also including one or two lesser known works.

Data Collection

For my methods, I first reviewed prior literature of any academic pieces about Roald Dahl, in particular I looked for pieces analyzing his work in children's literature specifically. I also looked for pieces about analyzing children's literature through the lens of gender more generally as to start building a framework. As mentioned, I mainly utilized Google Scholar as my main source for academic pieces and articles, as well regular Google to find Dahl's works, their release dates, popularity, critical reception, backlash, etc.,

Data Analysis

I analyzed my data - Dahl's books - by utilizing a code book which assisted me in categorizing gender, gendered topics, and gender representation in Dahl's works in a way that is systematic and unchanging no matter which book I analyzed. I also used the prior research I have found on feminist critical theory in order to analyze these pieces through that critical lens. Specifically, I used the work of renowned feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir and her

²⁷ "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory tops Dahl list." BBC News, 2016.

novel “The Second Sex” (1949). This is not only a book that helped to spark and inspire second wave feminism, but also one that has a focus on how women perform gender because of a construction built for them by a patriarchal society. There is one quote from de Beauvoir’s novel which I lasered in on to guide my data analysis of Dahl’s work: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”²⁸ In my analysis, I couple this central idea from de Beauvoir with the framework of feminist criticism wherein “patriarchy, in its masculine-focused structure, socially dictates the norms for both men and women. Feminist criticism is useful for analyzing how gender itself is socially constructed for both men and women.”²⁹ Therefore, with my analysis framework, I am looking for gender stereotypes and images of women being constructed through Dahl’s works and how Dahl dictates gender. More specifically, how Dahl uses language and stereotypes to craft an image of women, and if and how this portrayal and building an image of gender changes throughout his career.

Codebook

For my codebook, I first established all of my deductive codes which I went into the novels looking for. I used my feminist framework as well as previous literature on gender stereotypes on gender mentioned previously in order to create these codes. The first code in my codebook is Literary and Language Methods which borrows from established approaches to the analysis of literature and oral communication to explore underlying sociological, psychological, and cultural constructs. This code encompasses a more specific version of this, Motif Coding. In Motif Coding, application to qualitative data of previously developed or original index codes is used to classify types and elements of folktales, myths and legends. A motif as a literary device

²⁸ Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Classics, 2015.

²⁹ Eward-Mangione, Angela, “Feminist Criticism.” *Writing Commons*.

<https://writingcommons.org/section/research/research-methods/textual-methods/literary-criticism/feminist-criticism/>

is an element that appears several times within a narrative work, yet in Motif Coding the element might appear several times or only once within a data excerpt. Some examples of this would be Transformation, Mother and Son, Cruel Father, etc. In this sense, I compiled some classic gendered stereotypes and tropes in literature such as the Mothering Figure, or the Wicked Female which I could mark whenever I observed them in Dahl's works. The next code I established was Language (LANG) and a sub-code of Gendered Language (GEN LANG) which encompassed all descriptive words used for main characters, and then descriptive words with a specific gendered term included in it such as "spoiled girl" or "genius boy". I also established codes for things such as Gender (GEN) which was an explicit mention of gender in the text, and Stereotypes (STEREO) which would be any specific stereotypes mentioned in the books. Other codes included things like Representation (REP) and Actions (ACT) which allowed me to quantify the physical number of male to female characters and protagonists as well as actions or inaction from characters which could be influenced by gender.

As I analyzed the data of Dahl's works, I found some recurring themes which I did not initially code for, and those became my Inductive Codes. These codes were as follows: Male Weight Positive (MW+), Male Weight Negative (MW-), Female Weight Positive (FW+), and Female Weight Negative (FW-). These codes which I identified while analyzing my data as well as the codes I went into my data analysis with all helped greatly in leading me to my findings.

Findings

Through analyzing a sample of Dahl's works I found that Roald Dahl crafts an image of what a woman is using gendered stereotypes and specific narratives. While overt stereotyping lessens over time and Dahl portrays some overt feminist ideas in his later work, his subtle dictation of what a good woman is and what a bad woman is endures throughout his entire career

as a children's author. I came to this conclusion by using feminist theory as a lens to examine Dahl's work through, especially Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex" (1949). I illustrate these findings in the three main findings below.

Finding 1: Parallels of Writing and Social Context

While examining all of the five works selected for this research paper, I was able to identify a pattern of stereotypes in actions within the text. These stereotypical roles and themes were closely related to gender but more specifically, were related to feminist movements happening around the time of publishing of these novels. In using my Actions (ACT) code, I identified the action or inaction of characters in the books and examined them from a gendered lens. For example, in "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" (1964), we are told that "Mr Bucket was the only person in the family with a job."³⁰ Charlie's family is extremely poor, and yet in a time where women were actively entering the workforce and fighting to do so, Charlie's mother is not working. The overwhelming action that I found Mrs Bucket engaged in and the few times she is mentioned, is when she is comforting or loving Charlie, and calling him "my darling" and "my love".³¹ This dynamic of action as well as inaction, when viewed through a feminist criticism lens, shows a family engaged in traditional gender roles in terms of work, at a time where the feminist movement was fighting for the opposite. A year before this book was published, in 1963, the Equal Pay Act was passed in the United States which in part promised equitable pay for women who were newly entering the workforce in droves.³² Therefore, Dahl

³⁰ Dahl, "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory." 1964, p.5

³¹ Ibid, p.26-27

³² "Womens Rights History in the US." YourDreamBlog, 2023.

https://yourdream.liveyourdream.org/2023/02/history-of-womens-rights-in-the-us/?utm_term=what%20are%20womens%20rights&utm_campaign=&utm_source=adwords&utm_medium=ppc&hsa_acc=3468286777&hsa_cam=19733163309&hsa_mt=p&hsa_net=adwords&hsa_src=q&hsa_ver=3&hsa_ad=649471919440&hsa_tgt=kwd-297662556651&hsa_grp=152087132848&hsa_kw=what%20are%20womens%20rights&gad=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwjMiiBhA4EiwAZe6jQ4b0jkT2pLG76yuCR-Fra281GQZiYkihFyEVIJaALcpQAe_CbovjgRoCAfwQAvD_BwE

enacts a stereotype of women as the gentle homemaker in his novel, even in the most dire of circumstances, at a time in society when there was a fight to shift this narrative.

Dahl's representation of overt stereotypes and alignment with feminist movements of the time does, however, change as time goes on. While coding for Stereotypes (STEREO), I found many mentions in "Matilda" (1988). Matilda, in fact, has the most mention of overt stereotypes across all of the novels - overt gender stereotypes related to a woman's role are mentioned a total of 9 times throughout the book. However, this time, the overt gender stereotypes about wanting a husband and not pursuing education are seen as backwards and wrong. One major example of this in the text is when Matilda's neglectful mother and one of the clear antagonists in the novel responds to Miss Honey, Matilda's teacher, saying she is extremely smart by saying that "A girl doesn't get a man by being brainy".³³ Matilda's mother, Mrs Wormwood, also explicitly mentions a women's education movement in Britain from the mid 18th century, saying "I'm not in favor of blue-stocking girls. A girl should think about making herself look attractive so she can get a good husband later on. Looks is more important than books."³⁴ This is the first reference Dahl makes in his novels to a real existing social movement in these five novels and it is about and in support of the concept of "blue stocking girls"³⁵ and the education of girls and women. We can see in the novel that Matilda's mother envisions a traditional stereotypical path for her daughter where she marries rich and does not care for things beyond her appearance. This fight between her parents' traditional stereotypical view of her future and her want to learn and love for reading and education is one of the main plots of the novel. Dahl's portrayal of this struggle and the ultimate happy ending being Matilda living with her teacher and happily receiving an education shows a major support for this non-stereotypical idea of educating

³³ Dahl, "Matilda." 1988, p. 99

³⁴ Ibid, p.97

³⁵ Cambridge Dictionary. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/bluestocking>

women. This change in tune about traditional gender roles and this explicit support of higher education for women and girls is a definite change in presentation of gender stereotypes over time, as “Matilda” was Dahl’s last children’s novel. This view towards women’s education is reflected by societal movements of the time, with the Women’s Educational Equity Act passed 14 years before in 1974.

Therefore, we can see that while gendered stereotypes are present throughout Dahl’s children's books, the nature of them changes as time goes on. We start with a positive representation of traditional gender roles in books like “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory”, but end with a rebuke of traditional views about women in education with “Matilda”. In that sense, there was a definite positive shift towards the end of Dahl’s career which began reflecting the social movements for women at the time instead of going against it. However, as I will illustrate in my next finding, Dahl’s more subtle dictation of what a woman is and should be, endures throughout all of his novels.

Finding 2: Construction of the Image of a Woman

As I mention in my introduction as well as my data analysis section, I built my feminist criticism framework through which to analyze Dahl’s works largely on the teachings of feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. The main quote I used specifically is as follows: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”³⁶ This building of an image of a woman is something that I argue Dahl does consistently throughout his books. In fact, through the use of my Language (LANG) and Gendered Language (GEN LANG) codes in my data analysis, I argue that Dahl constructs a specific image of women and how they should and should not be using descriptive words and specific adjectives throughout his novels. These descriptions create two separate “types” of women: a “good” or “real” woman and a “bad” woman. Many times, these

³⁶ Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Classics, 2015.

descriptions utilize beauty, weight, and affinity for children as the factors which determine womanhood.

Throughout Dahl's works, he uses many very descriptive adjectives for all of his characters. It is difficult to go even one or two pages without seeing some sort of descriptive word for a character's disposition or appearance. In these descriptive adjectives, I found a pattern of descriptions of "good" and "bad" women. Through coding these adjectives for gender, and then again for if they were being said about a protagonist or a villain in the story, I am able to establish a narrative Dahl is creating through these descriptions about what the image of women should, and should not, be. For example, In Dahl's first piece of children's work "James and the Giant Peach" (1961), I identified twenty-three descriptive adjectives across the LANG and GEN LANG codes, and I tagged them as either negative and positive. In another round of analysis, I found that eighteen of these adjectives were used to describe female characters in both temperament and appearance, but with an overwhelming tilt towards appearance. In a final round of data analysis I identified what words were being said about either "good" or "bad" characters in the story, and sorted them into negative or positive. Out of the eighteen adjectives, fourteen of them were about the main female villains of the story and they were all negative. These included words such as "selfish", "lazy", "cruel", and "enormously fat" as well as explicitly gendered language like "ghastly hags".³⁷ There were four descriptive words used for protagonist female characters, three positive and one negative. The positives were "kind and gentle", "beautiful and kind", and "my greatest comfort" whereas the negative was in relation to a female bug's weight, calling her a "fat lazy brute".³⁸ In this data we can see that Dahl crafts an image of women which is easily sorted into two camps of good and bad. Additionally, we can see that these descriptions

³⁷ Dahl, "James and the Giant Peach." 1961

³⁸ Ibid.

include different gender stereotypes. He crafts an image of “bad” women as fat, uncaring, and greedy. In opposition to this, “good” women are for the most part constructed as gentle, motherly, and beautiful but can still be judged and ridiculed for their appearance. In this first book we can see the emerging pattern of a stereotyped gendered creation of what a woman should and should not be.

As we move into later novels such as “The Witches” (1983) we see a continuation of this building of an image of women through gender stereotypes. In using the same codes and data analysis strategies used for “James and the Giant Peach” we see a rich description of witches. In fact, Dahl spends 11 out of the first thirty-two pages of “The Witches” (1983) describing eighteen different aspects of behavior and appearance of witches as opposed to regular women, using various adjectives. Dahl explicitly describes witches as always being a woman at the very beginning of the book and states that they look exactly like ordinary women. Ordinary women, as Dahl describes, are “kind” “nice” “lovely” and “smiling”.³⁹ As opposed to these regular women, the biggest difference is that “a real witch hates children”⁴⁰ and that when they take off their disguises they are “always bald”, “tall”, and have “very wide and square” feet.⁴¹ In fact, Dahl describes them as “not actually women at all.”⁴² Therefore, we can see a construction of gender through the appearance of good and bad women being carried on throughout Dahl’s career in children’s literature. Women are supposed to be kind, lovely, and care for children. You are a bad woman, or in fact not even a woman at all but rather disguising yourself as one, if you are ugly and hate children. The image of the “bad” women in the witches, in fact, uses much more traditionally masculine descriptors in terms of appearance with words like “tall” and

³⁹ Dahl, “The Witches.” 1983

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.7

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, p.30

“bald”. Therefore, this image of what a woman is and what she is not perseveres into Dahl’s later works.

This theme of a creation of woman which de Beauvoir describes in her work is clearly displayed through the descriptors used in Dahl’s books. As I have demonstrated, this creation of an image of what a woman should and should not be is done throughout the books examined for this study via Dahl’s description of female protagonists and positive supporting characters versus his descriptors for female villains. Dahl clearly makes use of gender stereotypes in order to dictate what a good woman should be (kind, gentle, beautiful and motherly) versus what a woman should not be (ugly, selfish, unmotherly) throughout his books.

Subfinding: Weight in Dahl’s Works

One particular aspect of the descriptive language used in Dahl’s works which I briefly mentioned above is weight. Weight makes up the majority of the descriptive words for characters in most of the books in this literary analysis. In the books “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory” as well as “Matilda” we see a particular focus on weight as it pertains to all the characters. All of the well-liked protagonist characters, except for one exception, are described as skinny. The only non-skinny character who displays positive traits is the shop-keeper in “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory” and he is very inconsequential to the story. Overall, we see that this use of weight specifically in describing appearance is gendered and used to again draw an image of what a woman should and should not be.

In “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory” we see many weight descriptors used to describe the character’s we are supposed to dislike. For example, Augustus Gloop’s mother is described as “a revolting woman”⁴³ and Veruca Salt’s mother is described as having an “enormous

⁴³ Dahl, “Charlie and the Factory.” p.23

behind”.⁴⁴ These descriptors are all used to illustrate their vile personalities and undesirability. One of the most obvious examples of this is Violet Beauregarde is described as having “a fat hand”⁴⁵ and that once she is put through the juicer at the end of the book and is extremely thin, she looks “Much better than before”.⁴⁶ This use of weight as an extension of a bad personality of a woman is very clear in Dahl’s books and is a specific element used to create an image of good and bad women which I did not code for but rather discovered through my data analysis.

There is an even more obvious creation of good and bad women through image and more specifically weight when we look at Dahl's last children’s novel, “Matilda”. In this book we have one main female antagonist (Miss Trunchbull), a female sub-antagonist (Matilda’s mother Mrs. Wormwood) and an adult female protagonist or savior to Matilda (Miss Honey). In analyzing the language used to describe the appearance of these women, the link between weight and construction of women is clear. In the book, Miss Trunchbull is described as having a “bull-neck”, “big shoulders”, “massive thighs”⁴⁷ and is compared to both a rhinoceros and a tank.⁴⁸ Similarly, in the description of Matilda’s own mother it is written that “She was a large woman...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.”⁴⁹ In contrast to this, the motherly and gentle adult female protagonist Miss Honey is described as having “a lovely pale oval madonna face with blue eyes...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.”⁵⁰ In this way, Dahl is constructing an image of women where goodness and weight are connected and also both

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 115

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.95

⁴⁶ Ibid, p.149

⁴⁷ Dahl, “Matilda.” 1988, p.83

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 67

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.27

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 66

essential to being what a woman should be. All of the female antagonists in the novel, therefore, are described as fat in order to emphasize their wicked personalities which are unbecoming of a woman. Beauty and true womanhood are connected, and therefore so is weight connected to gender in these books. This use of weight as another way to construct the image of bad and good women was a surprising but very deeply present finding which I made that connects to the creation of gender and an image of women in Dahl's books.

Finding 3: Portrayal of Male versus Female Protagonists

For my third finding, I discovered through my data analysis that there is a severe lack of female protagonists in Dahl's novels. Throughout the five books I analyzed and the five main protagonists, only one was a girl. This makes a ratio of 4:1 male to female in terms of the gender of protagonists in Dahl's novels. There were, however, an abundance of female antagonists as every book I analyzed except for "Danny, Champion of the World" had at least one female character who was an antagonist in the story.

Additionally, the dichotomy of the portrayal of the male versus female protagonists is very interesting as, for female protagonists intelligence is frequently discussed in gendered terms and tied to gender whereas that is not the case for the male protagonists. The two characters that illustrate this point most effectively are Matilda and Danny from "Danny The Champion of the World". Matilda and Danny are both represented as brilliant, mature, smart children in their respective characters and they are similar in many ways in that regard. However, this brilliance is not attached to gender in any way for Danny. He is smart, extraordinary even, but his gender is never mentioned. In fact, according to my coding of Gendered Language (GEN LANG), "Danny The Champion of the World" had the least amount of gendered language with only 6 uses of explicitly gendered language. Out of those 6, only one pertained to Danny's intellect in any way.

In contrast to this, we have Matilda, who had the most instances of Gendered Language in all of the five books, with 19 instances of gendered language in the first half of the novel alone. Not only this, but the majority of this gendered language was used to refer to Matilda and her intelligence. This shows a difference in how intelligence is gendered for Dahl in the sense that it is irrelevant if you are a boy but deeply surprising and linked to your gender if you are a girl.

In terms of the way their disposition is discussed in relation to their intelligence, Danny is hailed as a genius and is not instructed to be humble in any way nor is his quietness ever praised or discussed as he does not display that trait. In Matilda's case, however, she is lauded for being humble and "unaware" of her genius as well as being polite and quiet. Not bragging about her abilities is seen as admirable. For example, in a scene where Matilda is solving very difficult times tables in front of the class, Matilda is described as speaking "quietly and politely and without any sign of showing off."⁵¹ In another scene she is described as being "very quiet and gentle...And not a bit stuck up in spite of her brilliance. In fact she hardly seems aware of it."⁵² In these examples we can see how, as opposed to Danny, Matilda is lauded about and encouraged to not show off her intelligence and her quietness is seen as admirable. These gendered stereotypes are therefore present even in later novels where more feminist ideas about women in education are being espoused by Dahl. Therefore, not only is there a severe lack of female protagonists in Dahl's works but they are also encouraged to be quiet and have their gender tied to their other traits like intelligence.

Conclusion

In this data analysis we have seen three strong findings through analyzing a sample of Dahl's works using a feminist criticism lens. I found and demonstrated that Roald Dahl crafts an

⁵¹ Dahl, "Matilda." 1988, p.72.

⁵² Ibid, p. 91.

image of what a woman is using gendered stereotypes and specific narratives throughout his career as a children's author. One surprising but encouraging discovery was that overt stereotyping lessens over time and Dahl even portrays some overt feminist ideas in his later work. However, as displayed through my second finding, his subtle dictation of what a good woman is and what a bad woman is endures throughout his entire career as a children's author. In accordance with this, I found an inseparable link between gender and weight in Dahl's novels when it came to creating an image of good and bad women. And finally, I found a severe lack of positive representation of women and even just female protagonists at all through the data analyzed.

Contributions and Recommendations

Through my literary analysis, this study shows a large lack of female protagonists in the works of one of the most famous children's authors. The implications of this in terms of hidden curriculum are very important in terms of representation for young girls reading Dahl's novels both in class and at home. Additionally, Dahl creates a potentially harmful construction of women in his novels which children internalize. All of these things are very important to consider in terms of what we are reading our children at home as well as in school curriculum. Given the discoveries made through my data analysis, I would recommend not only a continuation of the research I conducted utilizing Dahl's other works, but also an interview-based study with children to see how they are affected by the representation of women in Dahl's books. Lastly, considering the discourse surrounding appropriate books for children occurring around the country, it may serve both educators and parents well to consider what images of gender we may be encouraging our children to perform through books like Dahl's, as well as if women are being included at all in non-supporting roles. And if they are, what images are being portrayed of

women in terms of not only physical appearance but also the stereotypes being perpetuated through previously beloved authors works.

Works Cited

Casey K, Novick K, Lourenco SF (2021) Sixty years of gender representation in children's books: Conditions associated with overrepresentation of male versus female protagonists. PLoS ONE 16(12): e0260566. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0260566>

Henry A. Giroux & Anthony N. Penna (1979) Social Education in the Classroom: The Dynamics of the Hidden Curriculum, *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 7:1, 21-42, DOI: 10.1080/00933104.1979.10506048

Friedman, Jonathan, Farid Johnson, Nadine, "Banned in the USA: The Growing Movement to Censor Books in Schools." *Pen America* 100, 2022.

"Roald Dahl." *The Banned Book Brigade*, 2016.

<https://bannedbookbrigade.wordpress.com/tag/roald-dahl/#:~:text=Like%20James%20and%20the%20Giant,of%20most%20banned%2Fchallenged%20books.>

Diaz, Jaclyn, "Changes to new editions of Roald Dahl books have readers up in arms." *NPR*, 2023.

<https://www.npr.org/2023/02/21/1158347261/roald-dahl-books-changed-offensive-words>

McClelland, J. B. (2013). Roald Dahl ed. by Ann Alston and Catherine Butler. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 38(3), 368-369.

Mambrol, Nasrullah “Feminist Literary Criticism.” 2022.

<https://literariness.org/2022/10/07/feminist-literary-criticism/>

Sturrock Donald “Storyteller: The Authorized Biography of Roald Dahl.” McClelland & Stewart
2010. p. 44

Pennell, B. (2012). 'When one is with her it is impossible to be bored': An examination of Roald Dahl's contribution to a feminist project in children's literature. In A. Alston, & C. Butler (Eds.), Roald Dahl (pp. 102-122). (New casebooks). Palgrave Macmillan.

Chilton, Martin. “Roald Dahl Voted Teachers' Favourite Author.” The Telegraph 12 Mar. 2012.

McLoughlin Danny “Roald Dahl Statistics.” 2022. <https://wordrated.com/roald-dahl-statistics/>

Harris, V. J. (1990). African American Children’s Literature: The First One Hundred Years. The Journal of Negro Education, 59(4), 540–555. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2295311>

Lewis, M., Cooper Borkenhagen, M., Converse, E., Lupyan, G., & Seidenberg, M. S. (2022). What Might Books Be Teaching Young Children About Gender? Psychological Science, 33(1), 33–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976211024643>

Casey K, Novick K, Lourenco SF (2021) Sixty years of gender representation in children’s

books: Conditions associated with overrepresentation of male versus female protagonists.
PLoS ONE 16(12): e0260566. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0260566>

Tsao, Y. (2008). Gender Issues in Young Children's Literature. *Reading Improvement*, 45, 108.

Eward-Mangione, Angela, "Feminist Criticism." Writing Commons.

<https://writingcommons.org/section/research/research-methods/textual-methods/literary-criticism/feminist-criticism/>

Anna Wing Bo Tso "Representations of the Monstrous-Feminine in Selected Works of C. S. Lewis, Roald Dahl and Philip Pullman." <https://hrcak.srce.hr/clanak/147117>

Berg, C. van den "Girl Power: An Exploration of the Female Characters in Roald Dahl's Fiction." Utrecht University, 2013.

<https://studenttheses.uu.nl/handle/20.500.12932/15029>

Taylor, Frank. "Content Analysis and Gender Stereotypes in Children's Books." *Teaching Sociology*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2003, pp. 300–11. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3211327>.
Accessed 7 May 2023.

"Charlie and the Chocolate Factory tops Dahl list." BBC News, 2016.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Classics, 2015.

Dahl Roald “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.” 1964.

Womens Rights History in the US.” YourDreamBlog, 2023.

https://yourdream.liveyourdream.org/2023/02/history-of-womens-rights-in-the-us/?utm_term=what%20are%20womens%20rights&utm_campaign=&utm_source=adwords&utm_medium=ppc&hsa_acc=3468286777&hsa_cam=19733163309&hsa_mt=p&hsa_net=adwords&hsa_src=g&hsa_ver=3&hsa_ad=649471919440&hsa_tgt=kwd-297662556651&hsa_grp=152087132848&hsa_kw=what%20are%20womens%20rights&gad=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwjMiiBhA4EiwAZe6jO4b0jKT2pLG76yuCR-Fra281GQZIYkihFyEVIJaALcpQAe_CbovjgRoCAfwQAvD_BwE

Dahl Roald “Matilda.” 1988.

Cambridge Dictionary. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/bluestocking>

Dahl Roald “James and the Giant Peach.” 1961

Dahl Roald “The Witches.” 1983

Dahl Roald “Danny The Champion of the World.” 1975.