

Roald Dahl's Problematic Gender Characterization of Miss Trunchbull in Matilda

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Abstract

Despite the popularity of Roald Dahl's last major work, *Matilda* (1988), there seems to be comparatively few scholarly criticisms about the main antagonist figure of Miss Trunchbull. *Matilda* is a story about the struggle against tyranny, specifically Miss Trunchbull. Also known as "The Trunchbull," she is described as "a fierce tyrannical monster" but is also a woman who is a principal of a school where she is the voice of authority. Her monstrosity is highlighted in her aggression against the children, especially the little helpless ones such as Matilda. Part of this monstrosity might be attributed to Miss Trunchbull's lack of childhood and her ambiguous gender. When Miss Honey reasons that the Headmistress was once a "little girl," Miss Trunchbull barks back by saying that "not for long anyway" and says that "I became a woman very quickly." This signals that Miss Trunchbull might have deprived of a childhood or not giving enough time to play and develop in her childhood. From Judith Butler's argument from *Gender Trouble*, I argue that the performativity of gender ends up constructing a problematic figure of Miss Trunchbull whose monstrosity is highlighted. This essay examines the consequences of the deprivation of childhood in Miss Trunchbull and her ambiguous gender.

Keywords: Roald Dahl, *Matilda*, Miss Trunchbull, childhood, gender

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I. Introduction

The popular children's book author, Roald Dahl, is known for his works such as *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *BFG* (1982), *The Witches* (1983) and his final major work *Matilda* (1988). While Roald Dahl's works for early adolescents have drawn millions of teens to his books, and many people applaud his gut-punching and slapstick sense of humor" and "crude sense of fun and delight in Jockey phrases," many parents have also felt uneasiness about the content of his books. As Dieter Petzold points out, sceptics of Dahl's works were "[c]onvinced that every book a child reads will leave a lasting impression on the child's mind," fearing that "Dahl's books will put quite wrong ideas into children's heads" (p.185). What makes people or especially parents uncomfortable is that Dahl sides with children who are oppressed by authoritative adult figures and punishes them so that good children triumph over comparatively evil adults.

Matilda (1988) is such a book that pits children against bad parents and a headmistress, "The Trunchbull" who is more than just bad; she is plain evil. Despite the popularity of Roald Dahl's last major work, *Matilda* (1988), there seems to be comparatively few scholarly criticisms about the main antagonist figure of Miss Trunchbull. *Matilda* is a story about the struggle against tyranny, specifically Miss Trunchbull. Throughout the novel there is a theme of positive image of children and negative view of adults. Most of the story is about the wonderfully gifted child prodigy, Matilda and how she masters reading at the age of three and her triumphs against her neglectful parents at home and Miss Trunchbull at school. Her parents, the Wormwoods, constantly deride her, yell at her and even rip the library book that she values so much. Her father, Mr. Wormwood, is characterized as using dishonest measures to succeed in his used automobile business. Both her mother and her father value watching TV and are disgusted by Matilda reading books. In order to get back at her negligent parents who fail to understand or value her, Matilda puts glue on the bottom of his father's hat, and dyes his hair, which is the pride of Mr. Wormwood.

Meanwhile, the tyranny would be against her parents but Miss Trunchbull, the main antagonist in the story is far more threatening in terms of violence (she uses corporal punishment), abusive language and monstrous character. As Kenneth Andrews so succinctly puts it, she is "[a] grotesque figure who rules Crunchem Hall with a rod of iron, the Trunchbull is a sadistic monster, and every schoolchild's worst nightmare" (Andrews). Kathleen Massara rates Miss Agatha Trunchbull as a "holy terror" and delegates her as a "megalomaniac villain" in her article titled "Roald Dahl's Best Villains." Deriving from Judith Butler's argument from *Gender Trouble*, I argue that the performativity of gender ends up constructing a problematic figure of Miss Trunchbull whose monstrosity is highlighted. I problematize the way Trunchbull is delineated and how the way she is delineated contributes to produce or undermine certain "normative" gender roles.

II. Miss Trunchbull's Monstrosity and Denial of Childhood

In an interview with Mark West, Roald Dahl was asked whether he found it more satisfying to write for children or adults. Roald Dahl replied with the following words:

It's more rewarding to write for children. When I'm writing for adults, I'm just trying to entertain them. But a good children's book does much more than

entertain. It teaches children the use of words, the joy of playing with language. (West, 1990, p.65)

Roald Dahl can be credited as doing an amazing job of using humorous descriptions and gives the readers imagery of Trunchbull that they cannot forget easily. "When she marched – Miss Trunchbull never walked, she always marched like a storm trooper with long strides and arms aswinging..." (Dahl, 1988, p.67). On the same page, there is a metaphor about her that causes one to chuckle with glee and horror at the same time: "Thank goodness we don't meet many people like her [Miss Trunchbull] in this world...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, 1988, p.67). This simple comparison of Miss Trunchbull with "enraged rhinoceros" gives readers an entertainingly horrible character that is indeed a monster.

Trunchbull's monstrosity is highlighted in her aggression against the children, especially the little helpless ones such as Matilda. Her method of punishment on children is astounding. According to Hortensia, a rugged ten-year-old, "The Trunchbull" is notorious for placing children in the Chokey. Hortensia describes graphically what kind of a place the Chokey is:

The Chokey is a very tall but very narrow cupboard. The floor is only ten inches square so you can't sit down or squat in it. You have to stand. And three of the walls are made of cement with bits of broken glass sticking out all over, so you can't lean against them. You have to stand more or less at attention all the time when you get locked up in there. It's terrible. (Dahl, 1988, p.104)

Hortensia frightens Matilda and Lavender by telling them that "[t]he door's got thousands of sharp spikey nails sticking out of it. They've been hammered through from the outside probably by the Trunchbull herself" (Dahl, 1988, p.104). Trunchbull seems to intuitively know what kind of punishment is terrible to children. Making Matilda and Lavender curious about her experience in the Chockey, Hortensia tells them her anecdotes about her fight with Trunchbull "with the air of an old warrior who has been in so many battles that bravery has become commonplace" (p.106). Hortensia joyously relates her pranks that consist of pouring a half tin of Golden Syrup on the seat of the chair the Trunchbull sits, and how she snuck into Trunchbull's room and The Skin Scorcher, a "very powerful itching-powder" (p. 107), on her knickers.

In another instance, the Trunchbull force feeds Bruce Bogtrotter because he stole her chocolate cake. In her dynamic voice, Trunchbull points a riding crop at Bruce Bogtrotter and calls him "this *blackhead*, this *foul carbuncle*, this *poisonous pustule* that you see before you is none other than a disgusting criminal, a denizen of the underworld, a member of the Mafia!" (Dahl, 1988, p.120). She even goes further by calling him "a thief," "a crook," "a pirate," "a brigand" and "[a] rustler" (p.120). When Bruce ends up eating all of her rich chocolate cake, Trunchbull violently throws a plate over his head making the plate pieces flow all over the platform (p. 133).

Trunchbull refers to the children as "garbage" or "warts." She uses derogatory language such as "slug," "witless weed," "empty-headed hamster," and "stupid glob of glue," to show her condescending attitude and utter dislike of children. Miss

Trunchbull is not only cruel to the school children; she bullies other teachers in school, especially her niece, Miss Honey, and takes over their classes once a week and humiliates students and staff alike.

All this imagery and metaphors to highlight her monstrosity is entertaining but there is something problematic in having Miss Trunchbull described as “a gigantic holy terror, a fierce tyrannical monster” that “frightened the life out of pupils and teachers alike” (Dahl, 1988, p.67). Miss Trunchbull is the epitome of the masculine female. According to Eliot Glenn, Miss Trunchbull’s gender identity is a concern since “Dahl paints [her] as male inside and out” (Glenn, 2014). Even her physique is masculine: “her great horsy face,” “massive thighs,” “bull neck,” “big shoulders,” and “powerful legs.” In yet another scene, her athletic power and physical strength is shown as she hurls Amanda Thripp for wearing her hair in pigtails which Amanda's mother so prides in. The school children compliment her as a male rather than a female crying out “Well thrown, sir!” (Dahl, 1988, p.116).

Kristen Guest offers up another interpretation that Miss Trunchbull can be seen as a representation of Margaret Thatcher, Britain’s first female prime minister. Coincidentally as Guest points out, Miss Trunchbull was created at the height of the Thatcher era (Guest, 2008, p.251). Thatcher was the “iron lady,” who had “steely determination and hard hearted lack of concern for society’s most vulnerable members: children, the elderly and the poor” (Guest, 2008, p.251). Guest makes a persuasive argument that Trunchbull was modeled after Thatcher.

If Miss Trunchbull is "monstrous" she is still anything but a boring one dimensional character. Miss Trunchbull fascinates the children in the school. She is a woman who excels in sports (at one point she is described as an Olympic athlete), and she is also a principal of a school where she is the voice of authority. She is a career woman, a headmistress, who has an authoritative voice and she gets away with all the corporal punishments and derogatory language used to her students, because as Hortensia casually relates, she goes by the principle of “Never do anything by halves if you want to get away with it. Be outrageous. Go the whole hog. Make sure everything you do is so completely crazy it’s unbelievable” (Dahl, p.117). Miss Trunchbull also has an uncanny sense of human nature: Hortensia confesses that “The Trunchbull has a nasty habit of guessing. When she doesn’t know who the culprit is, she makes a guess at it, and the trouble is she’s often right” (Dahl, p.108). If one looks into Miss Trunchbull’s past, even she might have her weak points in terms of how she became this monster.

Part of the monstrous behavior can be attributed to Miss Trunchbull's lack of childhood. When Miss Honey reasons that the Headmistress was once a "little girl," Miss Trunchbull scornfully barks back saying that "not for long anyway" and says that "I became a woman very quickly" (Dahl, 1988, p.86). Miss Trunchbull denies ever being a child but if Mrs. Trunchbull was robbed or deprived of her childhood, Roald Dahl might be saying that this deprivation of childhood or in this case, girlhood, contributed to her monstrous behavior. As Judith Rich Harris points out in her essay, “From the Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do,” childhood is a time when “children learn to behaving the way people of their age and sex are expected to behave in their society” (p.298). Also as Simone de Beauvoir articulates in her book *The Second Sex* in the chapter “Childhood,” “the passivity that

essentially characterizes the “feminine” woman is a trait that develops in her earliest years... it is a destiny imposed on her by her teachers and her society” (p.294). Simone de Beauvoir argues that

“While the boy seeks himself in his penis as an autonomous subject, the little girl pampers her doll and dresses her as she dreams of being dressed and pampered; inversely, she thinks of herself as a marvelous doll. Through compliments and admonishments, through images and words she discovers the meaning of the words “pretty” and “ugly”; she soon knows that to please, she has to be “pretty as a picture”; she tries to resemble an image, she disguises herself, she looks at herself in the mirror, she compares herself to princesses and fairies from tales” (p. 293).

If Trunchbull skipped or tried to bypass “her earliest years” that make her “feminine” through socialization then this certainly can explain her growing up to be a masculine woman. Seen from this way, socialization of what is “feminine” and “masculine” is the process of adapting your behavior to that of other members of society. Experience in childhood modifies children’s personalities in ways they will carry with them to adulthood. If Miss Trunchbull did not have a proper childhood and was deprived of a chance for proper socialization and play, this could account for her violent and monstrous behavior of disliking or even secretly being jealous of little children and venting her dislike of them through violent means. The small girls such as Matilda and Lavender, and Amanda with the feminine pigtailed may remind Miss Trunchbull of the stage that she believes that she somehow skipped or disliked. If she became “a woman” quickly, she might have felt the overwhelming effect of what Simone de Beauvoir posits that “for the woman, from the start, a conflict between her autonomous existence and her “being other”; she is taught to please, she must try to please, must make herself object; she must therefore renounce her autonomy” (p. 294-95).

III. Trunchbull’s Problematic Gender Politics

Miss Trunchbull may be Roald Dahl’s comic and yet satiric representation of power and authority that dominates the educational institution. Although Miss Trunchbull is a woman who should be a traditional figure of nurturing and cultivation through her job as headmistress, she uses the unrelenting exercises of her authority given by and entrusted to the institution:

“The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed; much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again (Case, “Performative Acts,” p. 272).

The two incongruous qualities are put into one person just as she is a masculine woman or a man trapped in a woman’s body. And this makes her monstrous. Also Trunchbull is another “child” – gigantic and threatening, and yet still needs maturing as she is constantly at war with children at her school. Dahl would agree with Simone de Beauvoir that claimed that “she [the adolescent girl] cannot become “a grown-up”

without accepting her femininity” (p.340). Since Trunchbull hates everything associated with femininity, it might be the case that she does not accept her femininity and therefore cannot grow up.

Eliot Glenn in her article, “The Dangerous Transphobia of Roald Dahl’s “Matilda,”” argues that Roald Dahl’s *Matilda* is a book that punishes Miss Trunchbull for acting like a man and rewards the traditionally feminine Miss Honey. Glenn posits that “a transphobic message about the dangers of straying from traditional gender roles” is given in the book and that “a conservative parable about the “right” and the “wrong” kinds of women are introduced to children, making it a problematic text. Glenn articulates that Miss Trunchbull’s physique is “gigantic,” “formidable,” with “big shoulders,” “thick arms” and “powerful legs.” She has a “deep and dangerous voice” and rather than wearing dresses she wears breeches and also flats rather than heels. Glenn makes a good argument that while Miss Trunchbull has a “pathological hatred of femininity” quoting the passage “If there is one thing the Trunchbull can’t stand, it’s pigtails” referring to Amanda, the little girl that gets hurled across the playground due to her pigtails. What is most persuasive about Glenn’s argument is that her name evokes masculine rage in that “Trunch” means “small post” and is a phallic reference. Also “bull” is an emblem of unrestrained male aggression as Glenn argues. Glenn ends on a note of premonition that girls who love sports and not dresses, who are tall and muscular and are tomboys who identify themselves with boys rather than girls will get the subliminal message that being “masculine” or not feminine should be shameful and this is not the message that should be given to children.

Moreover, looking at Judith Butler’s theory in her most influential book, *Gender Trouble* might give some readers what to glean on from her theory of gender performativity. Butler asks readers the rhetorical question of “what is a woman? what is a man?” (*Gender Trouble*, 1990, xi). Butler argues that traditional feminism is wrong to look to a natural, “essential” notion of female, or indeed of sex or gender. In her first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, Butler collapses the sex/gender distinction in order to argue that there is no sex that is not always already gender. While all bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence, there is no ‘natural body’ that pre-exists its cultural inscription. Butler states that ‘gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to “pre-exist the deed.’ (Butler, 1990, p.25). A crucial statement is that ‘There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1990, p.25).

In Butler’s argument, she basically says that ‘the masculine’ and ‘the feminine’ are not biologically fixed but culturally presupposed. As Sara Salih puts it, “If we accept that gender is constructed and that it is not in any way ‘naturally’ or inevitably connected to sex, then the distinction between sex and gender comes to seem increasingly unstable” (p.49). Butler argues that gender identities that do not conform to the system of ‘compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality’ – the dominant order in which men and women are required to be heterosexual (Salih, 2002, p.49). From Judith Butler’s argument from *Gender Trouble*, I argue that the performativity of gender ends up creating a problematic figure of Miss Trunchbull whose monstrosity is emphasized.

IV. Conclusion

While *Matilda* can be seen as a text that makes children rebels against their parents or other adult figures that they do not like, it can also be seen as a text that empowers children by having them confront their fears of punishment by these adults and indulge their fantasies for revenge. Hortensia's metaphor on the plight of the war against Trunchbull in the school sums up how children are up against the seemingly evil adults:

We are the crusaders, the gallant army fighting for our lives with hardly any weapons at all and the Trunchbull is the Prince of Darkness, the Foul Serpent, the Fiery Dragon with all the weapons at her command. It's a tough life. We all try to support each other. (Dahl, 1988, p.109)

While children cannot retaliate or openly take their revenge in real life, they can do so vicariously through Matilda's daring pranks to her parents and revenging Miss Trunchbull for making life miserable for Matilda's sweet tempered teacher, Miss Honey. Although *Matilda* is supposed to take place in the real world, it could also be classified as being in the fantasy genre because the story itself contains magic and fantastical aspects. Matilda has extraordinary mental power so that she can move inanimate objects such as a cup of water, or a piece of chalk. As Dieter Petzold points out, many commentators have seen the story as a fairy tale in disguise (p. 186). In that sense, Miss Trunchbull is like a fairy tale dragon and Miss Honey is a princess in need of being rescued (Petzold, 1992, p.186).

There seems to be an unending list of things to despise about "The Trunchbull" and every reader cheers for Matilda when she uses her special powers of telekinesis to write a message from Miss Honey's father telling Miss Trunchbull to give her back the house and money entitled to her niece. Although there is never a testimony or a chance to give Miss Trunchbull her side of the story regarding the possibly forged will and the death of Miss Honey's father, Marcus, it is implicated that she is the culprit of all these crimes. After she is scared badly by Matilda's chalk message on the blackboard, Roald Dahl's narrator has her skip town and silences her altogether. Looking at Miss Trunchbull from her past endeavors, there are no redeeming characteristics in "The Trunchbull." Even if readers view Miss Trunchbull as not exactly life-like but as caricatures, figures that are made ridiculous through exaggeration, the portrayal of her gender is problematic. At one point, she is characterized as "totally unpredictable. One never knew what she was going to do next" (Dahl, 1988, p.123). If she turned out to "become a woman" quickly but is only assigned an ambiguous almost masculine gender role as a "woman," Roald Dahl surely did a good job of making his representative villain, "The Trunchbull" a monstrous female that deviates from the gender norm of femininity. Moreover, if one looks into Trunchbull's brief statement of denial of ever having a childhood and how she became "a woman" quickly and a monstrous woman for the record, readers can somehow picture her as a literary figure that might have her own untold story that was silenced by Roald Dahl.

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