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Gender politics in Roald Dahl's *The Witches*

An analysis of the book to movie adaptation based on feminist theory

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Abstract

The purpose of the thesis is to compare aspects of the novel and the movie *The Witches* by Roald Dahl. More specifically, I am investigating the gender politics in both the movie and the novel, seeking to spot differences in the portrayal of females and women as witches in these works. Dahl explains the phenomenon of witches early in this children's book, emphasizing the great distinction between women and witches. He explains that witches are not human beings, but demons disguised as women. Despite this clear and intelligible explanation, the novel was met with mixed reception. Several libraries around the world considered the book to cause misogyny, due to its presentation of women as horrifying witches seeking to put an end to the existence of children.

Did Roald Dahl's portrayal of witches bring implications to society's perception of women and gender equality? Is *The Witches* an arena for acquiring basic misconceptions of women at a young age? These questions have formed the basis of the thesis, leading to the development of a thesis statement.

By using critical feminist theory, I sought to discuss and compare the gender politics in the novel and the movie. I found that it is challenging to conclude the gender politics in *The Witches*. There are some differences in the portrayal of women in the novel and the movie, and one may argue that aspects of them could cause misogyny, while other aspects could be supporting feminism.

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1.0 Introduction

Since I was a young child, Roald Dahl's books and novels always fascinated me. The characters were always energetic, frivolous and distinctive, triggering a special desire to read about them. The main characters were often magical, having exceptional features and abilities that were unknown for normal human beings. I believe Dahl had a unique way of describing the grotesque, and perhaps not child friendly themes, in a child friendly way. Not all of his stories ended well, like we normally were taught in fairytales and children's books. This made his works rather unpredictable and thrilling, as you could never know if the good people would triumph in the end. As a result of my enthusiasm for Dahl, I was tempted to write about one of his well-known novels "The Witches", which horrified me as a child, but most importantly helped me reading for pleasure.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the gender politics in the book to movie adaptation "The Witches" from 1983 and 1990. This is because the novel received criticism and powerful reactions for causing misogyny by portraying women as abhorrent and awful witches (Bird 119). Consequently, it is interesting to compare the book with the movie and investigate the differences between them, and how the movie might have adapted and responded to the criticism and accusations of misogyny. There are seven years between their release, and considering that the criticism led to a ban of the novel in many libraries (Curtis 167), one can perhaps expect a more merciful and lenient portrayal of women and witches in the movie.

To get a broader understanding of why the *The Witches* received criticism for causing and promoting misogyny and sexism, it is important to have some knowledge about what these accusations are based on. "Feminist theory" highlights the idea on how women have been systematically devalued and oppressed in different types of society (Coakley and Pike 45). By the use of this theory, and through a review and comparison between the book and the movie I will seek to discuss and answer the following thesis statement: *What are the gender politics in The Witches by Roald Dahl, and what are the differences in gender politics between the book and the movie?*

2.0 Plot summary of *The Witches*

When a boy loses his parents in a car crash, he must move to Norway to live with his grandmother. She tells him that real witches exist, and that they are evil creatures seeking to kill all children on earth. The grandmother gets sick, and on the spur of the moment she must move to a hotel on the coast of England to get better, unaware that the annual meeting of the witches is held at this hotel. The witches catch the boy and turn him into a mouse. As a mouse, the boy and his grandmother must find the witches' formula and put it into their soup. They succeed, and end up killing all the witches, but the boy lives the rest of his life as a mouse, with an estimated nine years left to live.

3.0 Theory

3.1 Feminist Theory

Feminist Theory is based on the assumption that the perception about social life requires an understanding of gender and society's relation to gender (Coakley and Pike 45). In the perspective of feminist theory, we must be aware of the sharp contrast between men and women in society, and the assumption that gender is connected to different characteristics and skills. It has developed from a common notion and dissatisfaction with intellectual traditions and views of women, and surmises that the values, experiences, and insights of women have not been taken seriously (Coakley and Pike 45).

Feminist theory seeks to explain in which ways women have been systematically devalued and oppressed in different types of society. The theory emphasizes the importance of women's rights, and that movements towards gender equality is an absolute necessity for a society to develop in the right direction (Coakley and Pike 45). Traditionally, the sport industry is perhaps one of the most common societies that advocates and promotes sexism. One example of this could be in the sport of boxing, where strong men fight each other and show domination, conquest and male superiority (Coakley and Pike 45), while women are holding up signs in between the rounds, barely wearing any clothes. According to Coakley and Pike, this does not only represent women as sexual objects, intended to please the male audience (45). It also gives an assumption that men should express brutality, power and strength, while women should appear as either objects to please the eyes of a man, or show a rather innocent and defensive personality, showing care (Toftegaard 268).

There are several forms of feminist theory, but most of them are well suited and used to ask questions about issues of power, and the dynamics of gender relations in social life in general (Coakley and Pike 45). The theories seek to discover the gender relations that privilege men over women, and men over men, but also their origin and the consequences of them. Also, discovering what may contribute in creating ideas of masculinity and femininity, as well as how they are reproduced and changed in society is also important in feminist theory (Coakley and Pike 45).

4.0 Methodology

The methodology of the thesis is a “systematic literature review”. This could be defined as a discussion or an answer to a well formulated thesis statement, by identifying and critically analyzing relevant research on the chosen thesis (Forsberg & Wengström 27). My thesis statement involves discussing and comparing a novel to a movie. I believe that utilizing peer-reviewed articles on feminist theory and research on *The Witches* can bring relevant ideas, as well as strengthen my credibility by having reliable research available to support my discussion.

I have collected data from two peer-reviewed articles on different aspects of *The Witches*, both available in my reference list. Also, my discussion is based on my own thoughts and interpretations of the novel and the movie *The Witches*, as I have read the book and seen the movie. This could be a weakness, as my discussion of gender politics will be partly subjective, perhaps with biases and prejudices, not necessarily displaying the actual conditions of *The Witches* from a neutral perspective.

In a systematic literature review, you are responsible for carefully picking out the sources you perceive as relevant (Forsberg & Wengström 27). One strength of this method could be the possibility to search for and use the information relevant to your thesis. However, this brings ethical responsibility, like for instance referring to sources in an accurate way as this is an important ethical aspect in scientific research (Forsberg & Wengström 145).

5.0 Discussion

5.1 The novel's perspective on gender

In the beginning of the novel, we learn that the protagonists are a young boy and his grandmother. They form a heroic duo, fighting the novel's antagonists, the witches. The grandmother and her grandson are having a serious conversation about witches. She explains the evil and gruesome acts of the witches, and their goal to put an end to the existence of children. Their conversation is very well highlighted in the novel. Dahl emphasizes the portrayal of the antagonists, the woman-like witches. The novel focuses heavily on depicting witches in an evil and immoral way, and this particular element is important throughout the entire plot.

The grandmother's depiction of witches is partially confounding, and it is reasonable to believe that it caused upsets and allegations of misogyny. She continues to elaborate on the vicious witches, telling stories on how they abduct children, turn them into different types of animals, and even put a curse on them that locks them inside a painting. The impression of witches as cruel women-like creatures is not exactly weakened. We learn that the witches use wigs, make up and ladieswear to dress up like women. The grandma teaches her grandson how to spot a witch, and that beneath the wig, witches are bald. Also, they have big nose holes, long claws as nails, purple serpentine looking eyes, as well as wide feet with square ends. They use their nose to smell children, and to witches, children smell like "dogs' droppings".

She tells her grandson that witches look exactly like ordinary women: "*REAL WITCHES dress in ordinary clothes and look very much like ordinary women. They live in ordinary houses and they work in ORDINARY JOBS.*" (Dahl 1). This gives us an impression that any women could be a witch, a noun that one with relative ease can associate with something bad. However, despite this scary and intimidating depiction of witches, Dahl stresses that women and witches are nothing alike. Early in the novel, the grandma explains: "*A witch is always a woman. I do not wish to speak badly about women. Most women are lovely. But the fact remains that all witches are women. There is no such thing as a male witch. On the other hand, a ghoul is always a male*" (Dahl 9). There are several moments where it seems that Dahl makes an effort to avoid stepping on women's toes. He approaches the subject of feminism in an attentive way, and even though the witches are depicted to look

like women, this does not mean that Dahl introduces female sexuality as a weapon or threat (Bird 121).

According to Toftegaard, it is typical prejudice that women show a rather innocent and defensive personality (268), likely to avoid confrontations and fights. This does not fully apply to the personality of the grandmother. When the boy is caught by the hotel manager for having pet mice in his room, he is commanded to get rid of them. Luckily for him, his grandmother stands up for him, and raises her voice: "*How dare you say that when your rotten hotel is full of rats anyway!*" (Dahl 21). She is not afraid of holding back, and shouts to the male manager with an aggressive tone: "*You had better get the rat-catcher in at once, before I report you to the Public Health Authorities*" (Dahl 21). They proceed to exchange words, but in the end the manager is forced to raise the white flag. The grandmother shows care for her grandson, but also expresses dominance and verbal aggression to let the boy keep his pet mice.

One can argue that despite the relatively clear explanation on the great distinction between witches and women, there are other events and utterances in the novel that could cause misogyny. When the boy is transformed into a mouse, he must plan new ways of living. He concludes that being a mouse is not bad through the following lines: "*It is not a bad thing after all, I thought to myself, to be tiny as well as speedy when there is a bunch of dangerous females after your blood*" (Dahl 45). Witches are referred to as "dangerous females", seeking to kill the children.

The novel ends well, and the boy and his grandmother succeed in killing the witches. Nevertheless, one can argue that the ending is bittersweet. The boy must live the rest of his life as a mouse, with an estimated nine years left to live. He will most likely pass away around the same time as his grandmother, as a consequence of the wicked actions of the witches.

5.2 The movie's perspective on gender

In the beginning of the movie we learn that the boy, who was previously nameless, has a name; Luke. He is presented as a clever and cautious boy, quite like in the novel. Considering this is a movie, you do not get the same thorough descriptions as in the novel, and you must make your own interpretations and gather information from your point of view. The fact that the boy now has a name, could mean that the boy has a more central and important role compared to the novel. However, this does not draw focus from the importance of his grandmother, who remains a strong female character.

According to Bird, women are usually defined in terms of their sexuality, and “good women” are usually either blonde, young, passive, attired in white. The “bad women” usually have dark hair, and are dressed in black with sexually attractive characteristics and qualities (121). This is recognizable in several parts of the movie. In the movie, there are some sequences where blonde women in white have encounters with mice. Although they are individual characters with no personal knowledge or involvement to each other, they all happen to be terrified of mice. They scream hysterically and are barely able to remain conscious at the sight of them. One can postulate that these scenes show a sense of weakness linked to women. It could be argued that it is stereotypical for women to be afraid of mice, despite their small size and harmless behavior towards humans.

Bird mentions how the movie has an “adult agenda”, depicting Miss Ernst, also known as The Grand High Witch as a sexual objective. She is evil, dressed in black, appearing dominant and confident. She has a red lipstick on, a black tight dress made of silk, and do often speak to the hotel manager in a seductive way (122). The movie highlights her sexual appearance and confident conduct in the way she talks with people, and especially the hotel manager. He seems to be extremely charmed and captivated, seeking “unnecessary” conversations just to have a discussion with her. Her charming appearance leaves him stuttering, and he has trouble holding a normal conversation.

In the movie, The Grand High Witch has a secretary and right-hand woman, named Susan Irvin. Originally, she is a cruel witch, seeking to please The Grand High Witch at all costs. The story revolves around when she feels that she is not sufficiently valued and accepted, resulting in a change from evil to good. She wears a white and flourishing dress matching, and in the end of the movie, she acts like a heroine, transforming Luke back to a boy. We can see her doing an act of care, something Coakley and Pike emphasize as a typical

quality associated with femininity (45). She distances herself from the cruel witches, perhaps portraying women and witches in a more gracious way.

5.3 A comparison between the book and the movie

As mentioned in the introduction, there are seven years between the novel and the movie. They have a lot of similarities, but simultaneously significant differences that gives you the impression that the accusations of misogyny have been taken into consideration in advance of the movie's production. They both have in common that they very well portray the witches as hideous and malevolent, frightening the adult audience as well as the children. In the introduction, I presented the following thesis statement: *What are the gender politics in The Witches by Roald Dahl, and what are the differences in gender politics between the book and the movie?*

It is important to note that the novel and the movie have differences in their plot, as this could affect our interpretation of the gender politics presented in *The Witches*. Perhaps the most explicit difference is the last scene where a new character is introduced, the good witch Susan Irvin. It is reasonable to interpret this as a joyful twist to the rather despairing ending of the novel, where the young boy's life has been shortened by decades, having an estimated nine years left to live. However, it might be argued that this twist results in an act of evildoing, as separation anxiety is arguably one of the greatest fears of childhood (Bird 120). I like to think that this addition and change of plot is made to clearly show a happy ending, where the evil witches lose, and the heroic duo prevail. From my point of view, it makes the ending more child-friendly, and the fairy in the end shows that even witches can be good.

There is one more change of plot that I believe has an impact on the interpretation of gender politics in *The Witches*. In the novel, the witches immediately catch the boy when they smell and spot him in the grand hall where their annual meeting is being held. When reading the novel, you get a reaction of panic and despair when the boy is spotted. They instantly grab him and pour the "mouse-maker" formula down his throat, transforming him into a mouse. In the movie, the witches struggle to catch him. They throw themselves over him but fall short in succeeding. This contributes in making the scene exciting, but at the same time the witches look silly and clumsy in their attempt on catching him. Against all odds, he manages to get away and escapes a room with barricaded doors, although he is

caught in the end. This scene does not make any difference in the witches moral and agenda. Still, one might say that it makes them appear less frightening, knowing they are clumsy and somewhat immobile, and that there is a great chance of being able to run away from them if you can spot them in advance.

According to Kaplan, women have traditionally been given second status in American and British movies in the 1970's and 1980's. It is common that they suffer objectification and have limited desires and ambitions (1238). However, in *The Witches*, women are in several ways portrayed to have strong desires and ambitions. The grandmother is narrated as a resolute and strong woman. There are several occasions where she breaks the traditional views on what general feminist theory explains as feminine sides, like being defensive, cautious, and passionate to show care (Coakley and Pike 45). We learn that she has been chasing The Grand High Witch for several decades, encountering dangerous situations resulting in her losing her finger. Despite this, she proceeds her hunt, showing that she is not intimidated by the witches although they can be dangerous even to adults. She breaks with the basis of feminist theory in British and American films from 1970's and 80's, and show dominance, bravery and aggression, all finesses and qualities that Coakley and Pike brings up as typical masculine qualities (45).

In Dahl's novel, The Grand High Witch does not have a name. In the movie, however, her name is Eva Ernst, which is a derivate from "Eve", representing sins, in this case seduction and temptation (Bird 122). It is clear that her character is more sexualized in the movie compared to the novel. In the novel, she gets relatively little attention for her beauty. In fact, her beauty is described with one sentence: "*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.*". In the movie however, her beauty is expressed through sexual clothing, and her seductive movements and ways of talking to the manager and the character Bruno Jenkins (Bird 122).

According to Coakley and Pike, females are often objectified and looked upon as sexual objects (45). Although the movie shows a more sexually oriented depiction of The Grand High Witch than the book, there are some interesting aspects of the movie that works against this typical female objectification. *The Witches* was banned from libraries mainly because of its portrayal of women as witches (Curtis 167), but in the movie, one can tell that

many of the witches' actors are men. Showing that both genders can play the role of a witch contributes in dissolving the idea that witches are reserved to women.

As a final result of analyzing the novel and the movie, I get the impression that the novel mainly highlights the witches, and seeks to depict witches as cruel, frightening, and cunning creatures. I believe the reason is to create an exciting and unpredictable story, and even though the good triumphs, they do not walk away completely unscathed. The witches show their dangerous sides, making a bittersweet ending. It seems like the movie has slightly learnt from the criticism of the novel. Many of the witches have manly actors, showing that witches are not limited to women. Overall, the movie depicts witches as less gruesome compared to the novel. It has more focus on humor, and the witches appear sillier and perhaps less intelligent compared to the novel. This makes them less frightening, and the story somewhat less dramatic. Additionally, the appearance of the good witch turning Luke back to a boy makes the ending slightly more cheerful.

6.0 Conclusion

In the introduction, the following thesis statement was introduced: *What are the gender politics in *The Witches* by Roald Dahl, and what are the differences in gender politics between the book and the movie?*

When analyzing and comparing events in the novel and movie by the use of feminist theory, I found aspects that could be interpreted as misogynic, and the opposite. According to Curtis, the novel was criticized for portraying witches as women (167) and linking them to each other. Early in the novel, Dahl explains through the voice of the grandmother that witches and women are nothing alike. The witches are simply disguised as women and cannot be men. This might be a provocative statement, but on the other hand, Dahl provides an example of a different creature, a ghoul, that can only be a man.

The Witches portrays some women in a stereotypical way. Several women are terrified of mice, and The Grand High Witch is displayed as a sexual objective. She wears dark clothing and has a red lipstick on, a classic version of a “femme fatale” (Bird 122). With her sexual appearance, she charms the hotel manager and whips him around as she wishes.

It is challenging to wind up the gender politics in *The Witches*. There are reasons to argue that some aspects of it can cause ideas of misogyny, but on the other hand, women are also portrayed as strong and dominant, qualities that Coakley and Pike associates with typical masculine qualities (45). One could interpret this in the way that Dahl seeks to support feminism, by promoting controversy in strong female characters. This is very well shown through the character of the grandmother. However, it is also reasonable to think that children could link witches and women to each other, and that *The Witches* has contributed in making children scared of women.

For further research on the subject, it could be interesting to analyze and compare a book to movie adaptation that has a longer period of time between their publishing. It is interesting to note that *The Witches* is supposedly being remade and is expected to be shown in cinemas within the end of the year of 2020.

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