Charlie and the Chocolate Factory Short Guide

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory by Roald Dahl

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

Dahl has said that his only purpose in writing books for children is to entertain and foster a love of reading. The book's slap-stick humor, fantastic setting, and exaggerated characters appeal to the tastes of young readers. It has an original and fast-paced plot about a poor boy who, along with four other children, wins an opportunity to tour a wondrous and mysterious chocolate factory that has been sealed off from the public for ten years.

The book is especially effective when read aloud and is frequently used by teachers who read to their classes. This is partially due to Dahl's playful use of language, featuring rhymes, puns, and hyperbole.

About the Author

Roald Dahl was born September 13, 1916, in Llandaff, South Wales. At the age of eight, he was sent to a boarding school in southwest England and went on to attend Repton, a prestigious boarding school near Derby. One of his most vivid memories of his Repton years concerns the testing of chocolate bars. Cadbury, a famous chocolate manufacturer, would occasionally give the students some new types of chocolate bars and ask the students to rate them. While he was performing this pleasant task, Dahl would fantasize about working in the lab where these chocolates were invented. He had no idea, though, that he would one day base a book on these daydreams.

Upon graduating from Repton in 1933, he went to work for Shell Oil Company and was stationed in East Africa. With the outbreak of World War II, he joined the Royal Air Force and became a fighter pilot. He survived a fiery crash in Libya and numerous dogfights over Greece before he was disabled and sent back to England. During the 1940s, he wrote aseries of stories about his war experiences. The stories were well received, and he decided to become a full-time writer. Throughout the 1950s, he wrote numerous short stories, specializing in what one critic called "the eerie, macabre, chiller-type story."

Dahl began writing for young people in the early 1960s. His first children's book, James and the Giant Peach, was published in 1961 and was followed by Charlie and the Chocolate Factory in 1964. Since then he has published numerous books for young readers, including a second book about Charlie entitled Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator (1972). Several of Dahl's children's books have met with strong disapproval from some adults who think that his stories are vulgar, excessively violent, and encourage disrespect for authority. Despite these charges, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and several of his other children's books remain tremendously popular. He died on November 23, 1990 in Oxford, England.

Setting

Although the main setting of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory is a magical confectionery, it begins in a contemporary industrial area known simply as "a great town." Because Dahl never mentions the city's name or location, he gives a sense of universality to the story.

It could be taking place in practically any large city in England or America.

The city, however, has one distinguishing characteristic: it is the home of Wonka's factory.

From the outside, Wonka's Factory looks much like any other factory, but the interior is fantastic. The city's residents are unaware that most of the factory lies underground, consisting of winding tunnels and various chambers.

The Chocolate Room, for example, resembles an outdoor park complete with a beautiful waterfall; but the cascading liquid is actually melted chocolate.

Another chamber is called the Inventing Room. Crammed with pipes, pots, and odd machines, it is a center of activity.

Although each chamber is different, a sensual quality pervades the entire factory. It's a place where practically everything tastes, smells, and looks good.

Social Sensitivity

Over the years, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory has been accused of being vulgar, sadistic, subversive, ageist, and racist. Of all these accusations, however, the charge of racism is the most serious. The charge, of course, has to do with the portrayal of the Oompa-Loompas as black pygmies from Africa. Dahl has commented that it hadn't occurred to him that his depiction of the OompaLoompas was racist. But after critics pointed out that all of the workers were black, he revised the book. Dahl would prefer that people read the revised edition, which is the only edition that is now in print. However, there are countless copies of the original version in circulation.

Literary Qualities

Among adults, there is no general agreement as to the book's literary merits. Some opponents of the book consider it one of the most tasteless books ever written for children. Others, however, argue that the book should be read as a modern fairy tale, within a tradition in which the characters are stereotypes and violence and ruthless punishments are taken for granted.

Dahl does, in fact, draw on that tradition. He not only borrows the forms of violence that run through many fairy tales, but he uses the types of characters found in these tales. As Bruno Bettelheim points out in The Uses of Enchantment, fairy tale characters are "either good or bad, nothing in between."

Themes and Characters

Charlie Bucket, the central character in the book, is not really a character at all. Aside from being a well-behaved boy from a poor family, Charlie has no distinguishing qualities and no distinct personality. He is, as his name suggests, an empty container, a shell waiting to be filled. It is the reader who fills in the outline by becoming Charlie. By providing a character who stands for the reader, Dahl propels us into the story in a very direct way.

The other children are more symbols than characters. Augustus Gloop, an obese boy, symbolizes gluttony; Veruca Salt, a spoiled rich girl, embodies selfishness; Violet Beauregarde, a gumchewing chatterbox, exemplifies mindlessness; and Mike Teavee, a television addict, represents idleness. These children have no characteristics other than the behavior flaws that they represent. When they are punished for their sins, the reader can take a righteous pleasure in their fate without feeling pangs of pity.

Another set of characters that figure in the story are the Oompa-Loompas, tiny people who live and work in the factory.

In the original 1964 version of the book, they have black skin and are said to be pygmies from Africa. After critics accused Dahl of racism, he changed the portrait of the Oompa-Loompas. In the revised edition, published in 1973, they are no longer black. They have long, wavy hair and come from an imaginary place called Loompaland. Besides working in the factory, at various points in the book, the Oompa-Loompas comment on events in the story through their songs.

Aside from Willy Wonka, the adults in the story are minor figures. Although Charlie lives with his parents and four grandparents, the only one who participates in his adventures is Grandpa Joe, and he does little more than answer a few of Charlie's questions. Willy Wonka, the owner of the factory, is the character upon whom the story hinges.

He is an aggressive and manic person, always in control and on the move. Like the other characters, he is the personification of a particular aspect of human behavior. He represents the young person's libidinal drive, the desire to indulge in sensual pleasures, and act out aggressive fantasies. He is free to do the things that most children only wish that they could do.

One of the reasons the book is so popular with young readers is that it presents their own fantasies. Dahl does not simply depict children's daydreams; he crafts a satisfying story in which the sensual pleasures of a food fantasy are harmoniously combined with the thrills of an aggression fantasy. While adults may find the story disconcerting, children find it both amusing and reassuring. In a sense, Dahl lets young people know that their less civilized fantasies are shared by others, and that can be a comforting thought.

Adaptations

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory was made by Paramount into the motion picture Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory in 1971. Directed by Mel Stuart, the movie stars Gene Wilder as Willy Wonka. His is a marvelous interpretation of the bizarre character who can do almost anything at any moment.

The screenplay was written by Dahl himself, and it provides the narrative with more suspense than is found in the novel: By disobeying one of Wonka's many rules, Charlie may lose all that he has won. The Oompa-Loompas are interesting but somewhat disappointing because they lack the unusual clothes of the characters in the novel.

They sing clever songs throughout the motion picture; these songs make each moral lesson clear as the naughty children suffer for their bad behavior. As a whole, the movie captures the wondrous spirit of the novel, bringing Wonka's strange factory to life.

Key Questions

It may be hard to separate discussion of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory from the old controversy generated in 1972 by Eleanor Cameron's attack on it, but the novel offers much more for discussion than just a rehashing of old complaints. If a discussion group is interested in investigating Cameron's accusations, a place to start would be comparing the present-day edition, with the supposedly offensive parts revised, with the original edition. The origin and traits of the Oompa-Loompas was somewhat modified. Were these modifications necessary? Were they successful in removing the objectionable parts of the novel? Which version of the novel makes better reading? A danger, here, is that a discussion could shift its focus from the novel to what is or is not offensive in literature, which with just a little push could result in a freefor-all in which objectivity is lost and group members end up lost in an argument over who has better taste in reading.

A discussion leader, if there is one, would do well to lead the group into matters of theme, style, and structure.

As a modern fairy tale, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory may be seen as an expression of its audience's desires.

Just as medieval folk tales told of warm beds, plenty of food, and comfortable homes (often castles), for an audience that yearned for these things, so too might Charlie and the Chocolate Factory address its young audience's desires for moral certitude, compassion, and sweets. Its style is representative of the kind of free-association often found in fairy tales and with the qualities of dreams — bedridden for twenty years, an elderly man gets up and starts walking around just fine, thank you; people have jobs screwing on toothpaste-tube caps (well, somebody has to do it!); and candy factories can be wonderlands devoted to the mysteries and challenges of being young. Its structure rambles; the fun is in being there, inside the world's most mysterious candy factory, and experiencing the wonders it holds. Hours of discussion could be devoted to the novel's symbolism, to its moralistic tone, and to its sometimes gentle, sometimes outrageous humor (there goes another bad nut, down the hole)!

1. A striking aspect of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory is its moralizing. Children in general recognize the morals and understand their meaning, but why would they love a book that moralizes at them page after page? The novel could be no more than a particularly annoying adult wagging his or her finger at the children and shouting, "Don't be a pig! Leave some for others!

Don't chew gum while you speak!

Don't watch TV all the time! Other people have rights, too!" Indeed, Wonka and the Oompa-Loompas spend much of the book telling children what they should and should not do. Yet, children love this book. In many bookstores children's books can be divided into two groups. Some are meant for children to buy for themselves, others are meant

for grownups to buy for children: Charlie and the Chocolate Factory is one of those books children choose for themselves. Why? What makes its moralizing appealing?

2. Comparisons with the motion picture version of the novel can be illuminating of how fiction works and how it contrasts with a dramatic medium. The morals of the novel are pointedly present in the motion picture, with the Oompa-Loompas singing summaries of what each episode of the story is supposed to teach. The motion picture has a better organized plot than the novel. Is this necessary for the successful transfer of fiction to film? Why is it that fiction can succeed without much of a plot? What does the contrast suggest about the possibilities for fiction? Can fiction do what other literary media cannot?

3. The characterization of Wonka is a puzzler. One moment he is a remonstrative parent, the next a kindly candy maker, and the next a magician of frightening power. This fits in well with the dreamlike aspects of the narrative, but offers difficult challenges for analysis. Is Willy Wonka a wellfleshed character? Is he one-dimensional? Or is he something else, altogether?

4. Charlie and the Chocolate Factory is packed with symbolism. What symbols in the book do children respond to? Are there any that children would miss? What makes the symbols (include here the factory itself) attractive to readers? No one should read the novel to be educated; it is for fun. So how do the symbols entertain? Are symbols not supposed to be the dull stuff of old textbooks?

5. How would you characterize the humor in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory? Does it victimize any characters and through the characters any social groups? Or is the humor carefree?

6. Identify the fairy tale elements of Dahl's narrative. You might find it helpful to compare the novel to specific fairy tales. For instance, "Beauty and the Beast" shares symbols and themes in common with Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. The enchanted castle parallels the factory, full of amazing sights and lessons to be learned; the beast parallels Willy Wonka, magical characters both, whose domains reflect their wild, romantic natures, and who need the love of others; and Beauty parallels Charlie, each the readers surrogate, trapped in a strange world filled with mystery and danger. Other good fairy tales for comparison would include "Sleeping Beauty" and "Goldilocks and the Three Bears."

7. Adults may well be irritated by the novel's loose structure. Such a structure suits Dahl's purpose for writing a magical adventure in which sights, sounds, and sensations are more important than conflict. Are children similarly bothered by the structure? Is it just an annoyance to be put up with while enjoying the good aspects of the story, or might it be a reflection of what Jean Russell perceives as "an inventive imagination that is totally child-centered"? Does Dahl write in a style in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory that better suited to children than adults?

8. Is the novel good literature? That is, does it feature good characterization, well-developed themes, and in some way reflect the universal human condition? Are any of us Charlies, or Violet Beauregardes, or Veruca Salts, or one of the other characters? Are the difficulties they face universal ones?

9. When discussing a magical figure dealing with outsiders he has brought into his magical realm, it hard to avoid mentioning the ultimate such tale, that of Shakespeare's The Tempest. What plot elements do the novel and play have in common? Why does Prospero bring the people he does into his personal realm of mystery? Why does Wonka bring the people he does into his own realm of mystery? What does each figure hope to gain? What does each stand to loose? And what of Caleban and Ariel on the one hand and the Oompa-Loompas on the other? What do they share in common? The Tempest is a masterful depiction of forgiveness and reconciliation; is this what the motion picture version of Dahl's novel was reaching for with its climax? Does the novel do this, too?

10. Is Charlie and the Chocolate Factory an offensive, mean gathering of cliched tripe? Is it more complex than that? Is it something else, altogether?

Topics for Discussion

1. In the first part of the book, Dahl tries to build the reader's anticipation about the chocolate factory. What techniques does he use? How successful is he?

2. The chocolate factory is supposed to be a wondrous place. What are its most wondrous features? Of its many rooms, which is your favorite?

3. Four of the five children who tour the factory are punished for their misbehavior. How do their fates correspond to their actions? Are their punishments too severe?

4. The four children who are punished are not the only characters whom Dahl condemns. He also criticizes their parents. How do these parents contribute to their children's behavior?

5. Although this book is very popular with children, it is disliked by many adults. Why do these two different age groups have such different reactions to the same text?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Charlie and the Chocolate Factory has been called a modern fairy tale. What characteristics does it have in common with traditional fairy tales?

2. Throughout the book, Dahl coins words and employs puns. Why does he do this? Does this type of word play enhance the story?

3. In some ways, Dahl is following in the footsteps of Lewis Carroll (18321898) and Edward Lear (1812-1888). Compare Charlie and the Chocolate Factory to Carroll's Alice books or Lear's nonsense poetry. What similarities and differences do you see?

4. Charlie and the Chocolate Factory has a sensual quality to it. How does Dahl work the five senses into the story? Which of the senses does he refer to most frequently?

5. Critic Eleanor Cameron says this book is "tasteless." Read her essay "A Question of Taste" or some of her other attacks on the book. Does she convince you that the book is bad for children? Is it necessary that all children's books be in good taste?

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Related Titles

The sequel to Charlie and the Chocolate Factory is Charlie and the Glass Elevator (1972).

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