

Children's books today tend to fall into a category referred to as "typical case." These typical case books are didactic, serious, cute and they are often not as appealing to kids because the books feel like an adult trying to shove a lesson into a book that is supposed to be enjoyable and interesting. However, there are instances where a children's book is considered productive. These books are harder to find because the purpose of them isn't to tell a lesson or to educate the child in any way. Productive books are often more blissful, carnivalesque, and strange and the child character has complex emotions and ways of thinking. These children's books often get a lot of backlash from adults because of the fact that they are not typical case books and do not try to feed a child's mind with life lessons. The traits of a productive book can be found in a children's book called *The Witches* by Roald Dahl. This children's book has many symptoms of a productive text because it resists and points out ideologies, contains complex children, and has many other symptoms of a productive text such as being carnivalesque, meta, blissful, and grotesque.

Roald Dahl is known for creating productive children's books with complex child characters. A complex child character usually has more experiences than a typical child and is able to process and understand more emotions and ideas. The narrator of *The Witches* is a part of what makes this text productive. Early on in the book, he says that, "My parents were killed" (Dahl, 13), which makes the reader aware that he has already had some traumatic experiences in his life. It is evident that these experiences have had an effect on his ability to process his own emotions. For example, once he comes to terms with the fact that he is going to be a mouse for the rest of his life, he says, "The funny thing is that I don't honestly feel especially bad about it. I don't even feel angry. In fact, I feel rather good. I know I'm not a boy any longer and I will never be again" (Dahl, 127). After realizing that a typical child would most likely not feel the way he did, he says, "I was being absolutely honest about the way I felt. You may think it odd that I wasn't weeping myself. It was odd" (Dahl, 127). In a typical case text, a child character usually lacks depths of emotion and wouldn't be able to process things the way this narrator is able to which is why he contributes to the productiveness of this book.

In addition to being able to articulate his emotions, the narrator often speaks directly to the audience in parts of the book. Not only is he complex and aware of himself, but he is aware of the reader which makes this book meta. For example, when he is telling his story, he will take a pause and say something like, "You will hear about those in a minute" (Dahl, 10) or will ask the reader to "Kindly examine the picture to the opposite." (Dahl, 10) This is a way of keeping the reader engaged and often makes them feel more involved in the book. Additionally, he makes the story meta by reminding the readers of his situations or making them think about how he is feeling. For instance, after going on a tangent about the meeting he observes, he says, "I hope you haven't forgotten that while all this was going on I was still stuck behind the screen on my hands

and knees with one eye glued to the crack” (Dahl, 88). Also, he makes the audience think about that situation by saying, “You can imagine that none of this was making me feel comfortable” (Dahl, 91). Making a text meta is not always an easy or common thing to do, but when a children’s book is meta it helps to engage the reader and makes the text more productive. Also, it helps to point out the strangeness and grotesque features of the book.

The grotesque and blissful qualities of *The Witches* makes the book stand out from other typical case children’s books. Quite often, parents don’t want their children reading something that is scary, grotesque, or disgusting which is why many children’s books are often cute and predictable. However, this text includes grotesque and gross content that involve death, harm, and disgusting details. The text includes details about how the witches make parents “Eat their own children” (Dahl, 38) and there are many other violent details such as, “Little boys sometimes get killed, too. Little boys can be run over by motorcars or they can die of some awful illness” (Dahl, 119). Additionally, the text transforms pleasant things into something that sounds disgusting based off of the description. For example, the author chooses to have the grandma describe eating shrimp by saying, “You squeeze the head between your teeth and suck out the inside. It’s marvellous” (Dahl, 48). Most of these grotesque details often have to do with body parts and bodily functions which are described as carnivalesque.

The majority of the imagery and descriptions throughout this text are carnivalesque. Carnivalesque qualities make a children’s book productive because it celebrates mischief, play, bodily functions, and mockery. Almost every image in *The Witches* are carnivalesque because they exaggerate the different body parts of the characters and make them appear disgusting and grotesque. When describing different characters, there is always a focus on their appearance and the way they look. For example, the narrator introduces his grandma by saying, “My grandmother was tremendously old and wrinkled, with a massively wide body which was smothered in grey lace” (Dahl, 15). He often comments on the appearances of strangers and says things like, “The first thing I noticed about this woman was her size” (Dahl, 65). The body parts of the witches are described in heavy detail throughout the entirety of the book as well which puts an emphasis on the carnivalesque spirit of the book. There are several instances where the narrator comments that the witches, “Have claws and bald heads and queer noses and peculiar eyes” (Dahl, 30). The grandmother describes their appearances as well by saying, “If she has the large noseholes, the queer eyes and the hair that looks like it might be a wig, and if she has a blueish tinge on her teeth- then you run like mad” (Dahl, 32).

A carnivalesque children’s book often has an emphasis on the lower half of the body and of bodily functions that would normally be a taboo and hidden topic to talk about with children. There are many parts of this book where characters comment on

the lower half of the body. The witches always say that, "Children are smelling of dogs droppings. Pooooo! Poooooo! Pooooo!" (Dahl, 77) and tend to over exaggerate it. Productive books tend to celebrate what is normally seen as gross and taboo. The narrator does this when he points out that, "It is always funny when you catch someone doing something coarse and she thinks no one is looking. Nose-picking, for example, or scratching her bottom" (Dahl, 63). Oftentimes, regular events in the book have something to do with the lower half in order to make fun of it. For example, when the narrator is a mouse and hides in the waiters pants, the other cooks tell him to, "Take off your trousers you silly slob!" and "Pull down your pants and we'll soon catch him" (Dahl, 171). This highlights how the author takes something that is supposed to be serious and mocks it or makes fun of it which makes it carnivalesque.

Because this book contains elements that are strange and carnivalesque, it often points out and/or mocks different ideologies that normally tend to be passive in a typical case children's book. *The Witches* brings these ideologies to the surface and exposes them in order to bring awareness to them. The main ideology that is brought to the surface throughout the book is the fact that the witches hate children. It is said in the beginning that, "A real witch hates children with a red-hot sizzling hatred that is more sizzling and red-hot than any hatred you could possibly imagine" (Dahl, 7) and "A real witch spends all her time plotting to get rid of the children in her particular territory" (Dahl, 7). Many comments are made throughout the text regarding children such as "Wretched child" (Dahl, 8) and "Children are foul and filthy" (Dahl, 77). Normally, adults adore children and see them as innocent and sweet which deviates from a typical children's book. Adults other than the witches have a low regard for children as well and there are parents that say things such as, "What's this little blighter been up to now" (Dahl, 149) and "The little beggar" (Dahl, 152).

Additionally, the book deviates from the ideology that adults are supposed to shelter children and always know what's best for them. The grandma doesn't often withhold information from the narrator and treats him as he is much older. For example, she will ask him, "Would you like a puff of my cigar?" (Dahl, 21). The grandma will also say, "Children should never have baths, it's a dangerous habit" (Dahl, 129). The narrator is often in disbelief and he will say, "You swear you aren't pulling my leg? You swear you aren't just pretending?" (Dahl, 10) when grandma is telling him things that he hasn't heard before. Most adults try to hide the scary truth from kids because they want to preserve their innocence, but productive books don't allow the adults in the story to do this.

A productive children's book contains many symptoms and characteristics that deviate from the characteristics of a typical case children's book. These symptoms and characteristics work together to provide a book that portrays the child character as capable, complex, and different. *The Witches* would be considered a productive text

because of the way that it is carnivalesque, grotesque, meta, has a complex child character and challenges ideologies that are usually passive in children's books.

***Word Count: 1,706***