



## Sifting through the Controversy: The Moral Problem in Roald Dahl's *Matilda*

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### Abstract

Since 1988, Roald Dahl's *Matilda* has garnered praise and criticism. This descriptive and analytical study addresses Matilda's moral dilemma with her parents and the authoritarian school headmistress. The paper examines whether the novel promotes moral empowerment through teaching or moral transgression by legitimizing a child's punishment of an adult authority figure. Child ethics, authority, and education's function in moral development inform the study's moral and educational criticism framework. The article examines Matilda's situation as a brilliant youngster living in a difficult family and subjected to school mistreatment through close textual analysis. The ethical ramifications of her acts against power-hungry adults are highlighted. Critical responses to the novel fell into two factions, according to the study. Matilda supporters see education, reading, and intellectual progress as self-defense and moral agency. The story encourages parents and educators to transform the family and school as social institutions. The tale may encourage disobedience, dishonesty, and indirect aggression by depicting adult authority as wrong and deserving of punishment, according to opponents. The study indicates that Matilda exposes the moral repercussions of ignored responsibility and oppressive authority, not just disobedience against family and school. The narrative portrays education as moral empowerment rather than corruption. Dahl highlights the power disparity between children and adults, inviting readers to reconsider parents' and educators' moral responsibility while framing Matilda's actions as a response to injustice rather than a rejection of moral order.

**Keywords:** Children's abuse, Children's literature, Family, *Matilda*, Moral Dilemma, Roald Dahl, School



## غربة الجدل: المشكلة الأخلاقية في رواية ماتيلدا لرولد دال

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### المستخلص :

منذ عام ١٩٨٨، حظيت رواية «ماتيلدا» لرولد دال بإشادة نقدية وانتقادات في آن واحد. تتناول هذه الدراسة الوصفية التحليلية المعضلة الأخلاقية التي تواجهها ماتيلدا في علاقتها بوالديها وبمديرة المدرسة المتسلطة. وتبحث الورقة فيما إذا كانت الرواية تروج للتمكين الأخلاقي من خلال التعليم، أم تشجع على الانحراف الأخلاقي عبر إضفاء الشرعية على معاقبة الطفل لسلطة البالغ.

ويستند البحث إلى إطار النقد الأخلاقي والتربوي، المرتكز على مفاهيم أخلاقيات الطفولة، والسلطة، ودور التعليم في التكوين الأخلاقي. ومن خلال التحليل النصي الدقيق، تدرس المقالة وضع ماتيلدا بوصفها طفلة ذكية تعيش في بيئة أسرية صعبة وتعرض لسوء المعاملة داخل المدرسة، مع التركيز على التداخات الأخلاقية لأفعالها تجاه البالغين المتعاطشين للسلطة. وتظهر الدراسة أن الاستجابات النقدية للرواية انقسمت إلى اتجاهين متعارضين. إذ يرى مؤيدو الرواية أن التعليم والقراءة والتقدم الفكري تمثل أدوات للدفاع عن الذات وتحقيق الفاعلية الأخلاقية، كما يرون أن السرد يحث الآباء والمربين على إصلاح مؤسستي الأسرة والمدرسة بوصفهما مؤسستين اجتماعيتين أساسيتين. في المقابل، يرى المعارضون أن الرواية قد تشجع على العصبان، وعدم الصدق، والعدوان غير المباشر، من خلال تصوير سلطة البالغين على أنها ظالمة وجديرة بالعقاب. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن «ماتيلدا» لا تكشف مجرد تمرد على الأسرة والمدرسة، بل تفصح النتائج الأخلاقية لإهمال المسؤولية والسلطة القمعية. كما يصور السرد التعليم بوصفه مصدرًا للتمكين الأخلاقي لا للفساد القيمي. ومن خلال إبراز اختلال ميزان القوة بين الأطفال والبالغين، يدعو دال القراء إلى إعادة النظر في المسؤوليات الأخلاقية للآباء والمربين، مع تأطير أفعال ماتيلدا بوصفها استجابة للظلم لا رفضًا للنظام الأخلاقي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** أدب الأطفال، إساءة معاملة الأطفال، الأسرة، المعضلة الأخلاقية، رولد دال، ماتيلدا

## 1. Introduction

Roald Dahl's *Matilda* (1988) has become one of the most celebrated works in children's literature, attracting readers of all ages with its imaginative story and memorable heroine. Matilda, Dahl's delightful, intelligent, and youthful protagonist, is one of his most popular characters. Young Matilda, a clever student who loves books, lives in a challenging environment in the novel. She is alone in the world without a loving family and shielded by the information and experience she learns from reading, and she believes literature reflects others' experiences and wisdom. Her family does not recognize her talents, yet she keeps going. Matilda tries to fit in with her loving family and friends in a little English town. The protagonist is mocked and intimidated by her blood and first supporters and strives to fit in. She quickly learns a talent that can improve her life and the lives of others.

The narrative of a clever, telekinetic youngster is thrilling. The plot of *Matilda* is designed to keep readers wondering and turning pages. Matilda can read adult literature and read alone at the library at four and speaks perfectly at one and a half. She likes English classics and learning. Matilda battles terrible parents: a deceitful car trader and his wife don't care about their daughter. They only want Matilda to watch TV while she has different thoughts.

Matilda's parents sent her to the village school at the age of five. After discovering her magical talents, Matilda aids her teacher, Ms. Honey, and beats the nasty headmistress, Ms. Trunchbull. Matilda and Miss Honey live peacefully when their parents left the village. Everything works fine for Matilda.

Matilda is depicted as an intellectual child who finds solace in books and learning, despite of growing up in an intimidating family environment that disregards her emotional and intellectual desires. The book is set in a small English village and follows Matilda's journey from isolation and outsider status to self-confidence. She uses knowledge, reading, and her own strength to deal with parental neglect and institutional tyranny. Dahl portrays a universe where adults often fail to do their jobs, and the child is shown to be smarter and more moral.

Despite its widespread appeal, *Matilda* has sparked intense discussion over its moral implications, especially in light of the child's defiance of adult authority. The main issue this study addresses is whether Matilda's acts against her parents and Miss Trunchbull, the tyrannical headmistress, are morally acceptable. Some readers contend that the book risks inciting disobedience, dishonesty, and disdain for basic social institutions such as the

family and the school. In contrast, others view these acts as legitimate reactions to injustice and abuse of power. This moral conflict raises important considerations regarding the line between transgression and empowerment in children's reading.

The primary aim of this study is to examine the ethical aspect of Matilda's interactions with her parents and educational authorities. This analysis specifically explores the representation of education, intelligence, and moral agency as instruments for empowering the child protagonist. The study aims to assess whether the story portrays Matilda's disobedience as a moral reaction to tyranny or as a subversion of the prevailing ethical framework.

This article is directed by the subsequent research inquiries:

- How does Matilda depict the dynamics between children and adult authority in familial and educational settings?
  - To what degree are Matilda's acts ethically justified according to the narrative structure of the novel?
  - Does the novel advocate for education as a means of moral empowerment, or does it incite moral disobedience and rebellion?

This study has significance for its contribution to the ethical and educational analysis of children's literature. An ethical examination of Matilda highlights the responsibilities of parents and educators, along with the consequences of authority misuse. The study clarifies how comedy and fantasy function as narrative strategies to confront adult wrongdoing, thereby enriching discussions on juvenile agency, morality, and the educational value of literary works for young readers.

## 2. Theoretical Background

The superiority theory of humor, ideas of child agency in children's literature, and moral critique form the foundation of this investigation. These theoretical stances offer a framework for analyzing resistance, power, and morality in *Matilda* by Dahl.

The construction of ethical ideals and the negotiation of moral responsibility within social interactions are the main topics of moral critique. Moral authority is frequently challenged in children's literature through heightened confrontations between adult characters and young protagonists. Dahl continuously challenges established moral hierarchies by depicting adults as morally defective and children as morally aware. According to Hollindale (1999), Dahl aligns narrative power with the child rather than the adult by writing from the child's point of view while having superior knowledge of adult hypocrisy. This reversal of moral authority makes it

possible to view acts of child resistance as reactions to injustice rather than as moral transgressions.

This research is further informed by educational ethics, which looks at the duties that educators and parents have to their children. Care, protection, and moral direction are emphasized as essential responsibilities of adult authority in ethical models of education. However, in *Matilda*, neither the family nor the school meets these responsibilities. Dahl's portrayal of violent instructors and negligent parents, according to critics like Alston (2012) and Treglown (2016), is part of a larger critique of institutional failure. Child opposition becomes a morally understandable reaction rather than a rejection of moral order when educational authority is portrayed as coercive rather than loving.

A key component of modern critique of children's literature is the idea of child agency. Dahl's fictional child protagonists are presented as morally active beings capable of making decisions and taking action, rather than as passive objects of adult education. According to Nodelman (2017), these depictions present a universe that mirrors children's actual experiences of marginalization and power disparity, challenging adult dreams of a perfect childhood. According to this theory, *Matilda*'s autonomy and intelligence serve as instruments for moral survival and self-definition.

The superiority hypothesis of humor, which describes laughter as resulting from a perceived domination over the failure or misfortune of others, provides the greatest explanation for humor in *Matilda*. According to Martin and Ford (2018), comedy frequently serves to uphold moral judgment by mocking characters who transgress ethical standards. By making readers laugh at the embarrassment of adult characters such as Miss Trunchbull and *Matilda*'s parents, Dahl exposes the moral insufficiency of these characters. By using this narrative technique, comedy is turned into a moral tool that condemns the misuse of authority and justifies narrative retribution.

When combined, these theoretical stances allow for a reading of *Matilda* in which comedy and fantasy serve as moral instruments rather than subversive dangers. The novel creates a moral cosmos where resistance is framed as a reaction to systemic failure and power is held to moral norms. This study offers a theoretical framework for examining how Dahl reimagines childhood as a place of moral agency and redefines education as a means of ethical empowerment by fusing moral critique, educational ethics, and comedy theory.

### 3. Analysis and Discussion

This section analyzes *Matilda* through the lenses of moral criticism,

educational ethics, child agency, and the superiority theory of humor, focusing on the representation of adult authority, child resistance, and ethical judgment.

Roald Dahl's depiction of adults in *Matilda* consistently undermines traditional notions of moral authority. Drawing on his own childhood experiences, Dahl portrays parents and educators as ethically incompetent, emotionally negligent, and often cruel. As reflected in *Boy*, Dahl recalls that from a child's perspective, "all grown-ups were dangerous creatures" (Dahl, 1984, p. 181). This perception is fictionalized in *Matilda* through the figures of the Wormwoods and Miss Trunchbull, who represent the corruption of family and educational institutions.

It is well acknowledged that Dahl's writings shed light on the state of alienation that young kids feel, whether as orphans or as alienated by their families, as in *Matilda*. The adults are absent either physically or spiritually from the lives of their kids. Thus, children are facing life on their own without their parents' support. The reason is explained by Jeremy Treglown when he said: "[Dahl] was himself always in search of father figures, having lost his own father. He was also in pursuit of mother-and-child figures. His ideal plot involves small children making friends with middle-aged or elderly people; people above the age of the ordinary parent" (p. 202). This is obvious with Matilda's friendship with the lady in the library as well as her attachment to Ms Honey.

Within a moral criticism framework, authority in the novel is stripped of ethical legitimacy when it fails to fulfill its responsibilities of care and guidance. Matilda's parents are depicted as selfish, ignorant, and dismissive of intellectual growth, while Miss Trunchbull embodies institutionalized abuse under the guise of discipline. The school, traditionally viewed as a safe and nurturing environment, is instead presented as a space of fear and punishment. This inversion exposes what Alston (2012) describes as Dahl's tendency to portray guardians who refuse traditional caring roles, thereby justifying narrative opposition to them.

Against this backdrop of adult failure, Matilda emerges as a morally aware and autonomous child. Rather than portraying children as passive victims, Dahl grants his young protagonist intellectual and ethical agency. One can observe from the author's presentation of the protagonist that he favors the young girl. "Dahl is speaking to the child [...] He is on the child's side, at the child's eye view, but with a better understanding of grown-ups" (Hollindale, 1999, p.138). He contrasts his young heroine with her parents and her only brother. She never shows her affection for them by calling them "mom" and "dad," as other children do. Instead, it is easy to sense that the

child feels superior, which suggests she does not feel she belongs to this family. Kirsten Guest (2008) notes, “Matilda’s thoughts ... place her parents and brother without the possessive pronoun that marks their relationship, rendering them ‘the’ father, mother, and brother. This grammatical disassociation ... conveys Matilda’s desire to disown her family” (252). Matilda’s refusal to emotionally affiliate with her parents, linguistically evident in her avoidance of possessive pronouns, reinforces her moral and psychological disassociation from unethical authority (Guest, 2008).

Despite her physical inadequacy and lack of social influence, Matilda uses her brain to exact small but effective acts of retribution and punishment on the offender grownups, in ways that would be hard to attribute to her. She feels superior and resented being told constantly that she was ignorant and stupid when she knew she wasn't. The anger inside her went on boiling and boiling, and as she lay in bed that night, she made a decision. She decided that every time her father or her mother was beastly to her, she could get her own back in some way or another. A small victory or two would help her to tolerate their idiocies and would stop her from going crazy.” (Dahl, 1988, p.22).

In his book, Christopher Hitchens explained the leading cause for the great appeal of Dahl’s novels amongst children: “There’s nothing very mysterious about Roald Dahl’s formula. It consisted, as he proudly confessed in one of the last interviews before his death in 1990, of ‘conspiring with children against adults’. He described it with some satisfaction as ‘the path to their affections’” (Hitchens, 2000, p. 168). Dahl's tone is also interrogated, according to Heather Worthington (2012), there is a "slippage in Dahl's writing, between his adult and child registers" (p.127), which seems to allude to the conflict between the adult author and child audience that was previously highlighted and which confirms adult concerns about Dahl's work's suitability.

From the perspective of educational ethics, Matilda’s resistance is framed as a response to injustice rather than inherent rebellion. Her actions against her parents and Miss Trunchbull function as corrective measures aimed at restoring moral balance. Unlike traditional fairy tales that rely on external saviors, Matilda rejects the trope of rescue through magical benefactors. Instead, education and reading serve as the protagonist’s primary sources of empowerment, reinforcing the novel’s emphasis on intellectual self-reliance.

### 3.1 Humor, Superiority, and Moral Judgment

Humor is a significant part of how *Matilda* changes people's thinking about morality. Dahl makes fun of morally flawed adults in a funny way by using

outrageous exaggeration and contempt. This corresponds to the superiority hypothesis of humor, which posits that laughter arises from a perception of superiority over others' shortcomings (Martin & Ford, 2018). The humiliations experienced by Mr. Wormwood and Miss Trunchbull elicit amusement specifically because they are depicted as justifiable consequences for the misuse of authority.

Instead of just being funny, humor is a moral tool that strengthens moral judgment. J. Shields (1998) contends that Dahl's apparent subversiveness emancipates reading from stringent moralism while concurrently fostering intellectual engagement. The laughing aimed at bad adults supports the child's moral point of view and makes it easier for readers to relate to *Matilda*.

### 3.2 Ethical Ambiguity & Education as Ethical Empowerment

Despite its celebratory reception, *Matilda* has faced intense criticism. Opponents argue that the novel promotes violence, disrespect, and immoral behavior, suggesting that it fails to teach proper ethical values (Barlow, 1994; Culley, 1991). Critics such as Butterfield (2014) contend that Matilda's indirect punishments involve deception and aggression, raising concerns about the moral consistency of her actions. According to the opponents, young readers are encouraged, at times, to use violence against the cruelty they face from elders. For instance, after being hit by Ms. Trunchbull, Nigel, one of Matilda's friends, says: "I wish I was grown up [...] I'd knock her flat" (Dahl, 1988, p. 210).

Critics attack Matilda's attitude towards her parents. Her parents are depicted as careless and ignorant. The author in his novel describes them as "so wrapped up in their own silly little lives" (Dahl, 1988, p. 7). The parents do not care about her well-being and neglect her extraordinary abilities. Thus, she has to do something. "Matilda was in a tough position. It was not simply that her genius was unappreciated; she was also in the difficult situation of having to suffer abuse from an authority who was thoroughly incompetent" (Butterfield, 2014, p. 39).

The father is introduced as a corrupted car dealer, evil and ugly. He is described as "a small ratty-looking man whose front teeth stuck out underneath a thin ratty mustache. He liked to wear jackets with large, brightly colored checks, and he sported ties that were usually yellow or pale green" (Dahl, 1988, p.17). At the same time, the mother is introduced as a negligent woman who is far from anything related to motherhood. "She was a large woman whose hair was dyed platinum blonde except where you could see the mousy-brown bits growing out from the roots. She wore heavy make-up, 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” (Dahl, 1988, p.21). Miss Honey illustrates Mrs. Wormwood as “plain plump person with the smug suet-pudding face” (Dahl, 1988, p.79). She is depicted as a trivial person who cares only about her appearance and knows nothing about the well-being of her children. Furthermore, she looks highly of herself and considers herself better than the educated Ms Honey. “Now look at me,” Mrs Wormwood said. “Then look at you. You chose books. I chose looks.”(Dahl, 1988, p.79). Mrs. Wormwood despises education and sees it as trivial and secondary. “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” (Dahl, 1988, p.79). In Dahl's *Matilda*, the mother is presented as an uncaring woman who can also be identified by her lack of love and her inability to make sacrifices for the sake of her children. In contrast, a good mother can be identified by her ability to love and her willingness to sacrifice herself for her children (Alston, 2012). This is in contrast to the universal image of the mother as an angelic figure.

Nevertheless, Matilda’s parents do not beat her or starve her, they keep her in a house and feed her. She is not locked in at home or prevented from going out, unlike the little girls in fairy tales. The author portrays her as a kid who seeks revenge against her parents. She tries to discipline them and teach them lessons in twisted ways.

Another point is that the publishers saw that Dahl’s writings were not child-oriented, as they were also directed to adults. One of the editors who rejected Dahl’s novel *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* indicated that “I could see that Dahl would be popular with children, but publishing for them has to involve more than that, somehow” (quoted in Treglown, p. 148). They argue that Dahl's novels are not suitable for children. The little girl, in *Matilda*, does not seem as innocent as she is supposed to be, and her twisted methods of disciplining adults are not meant to be a normal behavior in young children, who are not expected to be exposed to criminal or bad ideas. The novel is criticized for mixing violence, humor, and subversion (Nicholson, 2008).

Nevertheless, these critiques frequently presume that child readers are exceedingly susceptible and unable to make ethical judgments. Supporters say that Dahl's stories teach kids to tell the difference between right and wrong and between real life and imagination. P. Nodelman (2017) posits that this discomfort signifies adult fears around the loss of moral authority rather than authentic ethical transgression.

Ultimately, *Matilda* portrays education as an ethical alternative to both

family neglect and institutional violence. Reading serves as a means of self-formation, moral growth, and resistance. The novel promotes dialogue, intellectual curiosity, and empathy over authoritarian discipline and passive obedience. Through Matilda's relationship with Miss Honey, Dahl provides a model of ethical education rooted in care and mutual respect.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study has shown that *Matilda* does not portray childhood as a time of moral dependence or passivity; instead, it shows childhood as a time of moral understanding and the possibility of change. *Matilda* represents a child's ability to see what is not right and fight against the misuse of power in both home and school settings. She is unhappy with her parents' lifestyle and does not accept cheating, even when it comes from family. This shows a broader criticism of morally bad adults, not of morals themselves.

The book shows, from a moral criticism point of view, how leaders lose their moral right to make decisions when they are cut off from duty, concern, and fairness. Matilda's defiance towards her parents and Miss Trunchbull stems not from her inherent desire to oppose authority, but from her perception of their neglect, abuse, and overall cruelty. The book opposes authoritarian parenting and education rooted in fear, punishment, and intellectual repression. It advocates for education as a means to enhance morality and foster self-awareness. The book targets corrupt individuals rather than treating societal institutions as immutable. The distinction is evident in the narrative's conclusion. The family structure is not completely forsaken; instead, it is reimagined when Miss Honey adopts Matilda. Miss Honey is a character who exemplifies moral authority rooted in compassion and respect. Similarly, the school remains unchanged as an organization after the dismissal of the headmistress. This outcome reinforces the notion that the most favorable kind of change is improvement rather than demolition.

The incorporation of humor and magic enhances the book's ethical perspective. The superiority theory of humor posits that ridiculing and shaming morally deficient adults serves as a narrative punishment, shaping readers' moral evaluations and allowing them to empathize with a child's perspective. Laughter serves as a mechanism for exposing injustice and reestablishing moral equilibrium.

*Matilda* advocates for a concept of juvenile agency that contradicts prevalent notions of power and emphasizes moral obligation. The insurrection orchestrated by Matilda and her peers exemplifies a broader concept: the aspiration of youth to effect changes through intellect, education, and ethical understanding. Dahl's assertion that future generations may rectify contemporary errors does not present an unethical challenge to the established quo; instead, it provides an optimistic reevaluation of the restoration of ethics in justice, power, and education.

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