Discussion questions: Charlie and the Chocolate Factory

Instructions: this worksheet will be handed in and discussed the day after we watch the film in class. Make sure that you read the assigned chapter from the novel Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (“Veruca in the Nut Room”), before coming to class to watch the film.

1. Augustus Gloop, Violet Beauregarde, Veruca Salt, and Mike Teavee are more symbols than characters. What behaviour flaws do they embody? How are they punished? Are these children the only characters whom Dahl condemns?

2. Read Chapter 24 “Veruca in the Nut Room” (photocopy dossier) from the novel Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. Don’t forget to read the song. Answer the following questions, keeping in mind the Dahl interview discussed in class:

   a) Is the chapter entertaining or/and moralistic? Explain.
   b) Is it humorous? If so, give examples
   c) Are adults represented in a typical Dahl manner? Explain.
   d) Is there violence? If so, give examples.

3. Below are some differences between Dahl’s 1964 book and Tim Burton’s 2005 film adaptation. Why do you think those changes were made?

   In the film version:

   - the shop assistant where Charlie buys the chocolate bar is a black man
   - the Oompa Loompas are ethnic-looking dwarves from Loompaland, something that was in first edition of Dahl’s novel, but which he changed in the second edition due to charges of racism
   - it is suggested that Violet’s mother is a single parent, who at one point flirts with Wonka; in the novel her husband accompanies her to the factory.
   - Wonka’s family background is invented; in the novel, his father is not mentioned.

4. Read (a) the following fragments from a popular review of the novel written by Eleanor Cameron, a Canadian children’s books author, in 1972. What are her main objections to the novel? Do you agree with her? Then read (b) Dahl’s own response to her review. Does he defend himself successfully against Cameron’s attack?
(a) Eleanor Cameron’s review (selections).

“As for those books children go on reading decade after decade, we recall that Robinson Crusoe was published in 1719, Gulliver’s Travels in 1726, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland in 1865, Little Women in 1868, and Pinocchio in 1883. Will any one of the children’s books written in the past thirty years be alive and beloved one hundred years from now? It is a profoundly unsettling question for those who write with seriousness and not wholly for money …

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory is probably the book most read aloud by those teachers who have no idea, apparently, what other books they might read to the children …

Now, there are those who consider Charlie to be a satire and believe that Willy Wonka and the children are satiric portraits as in a cautionary tale. I am perfectly willing to admit that possibly Dahl wrote it as such: a book on two levels, one for adults and one for children. The book is like candy (the chief excitement and lure of Charlie) in that it is delectable and soothing while we are undergoing the brief sensory pleasure it affords but leaves us poorly nourished with our taste dulled for better fare. All interest depends upon the constant, unremitting excitement of the turns of plot …

And just as in the average TV show, the protagonists of the book are types, extreme types: vile nasty children who are ground up in the factory machinery because they’re baddies, and pathetic Charlie and his family, eternally yearning and poor and good. As for Willy Wonka himself, he is the perfect type of TV showman with his gags and screechings …

Brought directly from Africa, the Oompa-Loompas have never been given the opportunity of any life outside of the chocolate factory, so that it never occurs to them to protest the possibility of being used like squirrels …

I believe it is a pity that considerable sums, taken out of tight library budgets, should be spent on sometimes as many as ten copies of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and that classroom time should be given over to the reading aloud of a book without quality or lasting content …”.

(b) Roald Dahl’s reply to Cameron.

“MRS. ELEANOR CAMERON (I had not heard of her until now) has made some extraordinarily vicious comments upon my book Charlie and The Chocolate Factory. That does not worry me at all. She is free to criticize the book itself for all she is worth, but I do object strongly when she oversteps the rules of literary criticism and starts insinuating nasty things about me personally and about the school teachers of America.

… she goes on to announce that Charlie is “one of the most tasteless books ever written
for children.” She says a lot of other very nasty things about it, too, and the implication here has to be that I also am a tasteless and nasty person.

… She goes on to praise *Gulliver’s Travels, Robinson Crusoe, and Little Women*. I would dearly like to see Mrs. Cameron trying to read *Little Women, or Robinson Crusoe* for that matter, to a class of today’s children. The lady is completely out of touch with reality. She would be howled out of the classroom. She also says, “I should like to travel up and down the country going to elementary schools and saying to all the teachers: Find out about the good children’s books.” I myself would like very much to hear what the teachers’ replies would be if the patronizing, all-knowing Mrs. Cameron ever tried to do this. The hundreds of letters I get every year from American teachers tell me that they are on the whole a marvellous lot of people with a wide knowledge of children’s books. Mrs. Cameron finally asks herself whether children are harmed by reading *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*. She isn’t quite sure, but she is clearly inclined to think that they are. Now this, to me, is the ultimate effrontery. The book is dedicated to my son Theo, now twelve years old. Theo was hit by a taxi in New York when a small child and was terribly injured. We fought a long battle to get him where he is today, and we all adore him. So the thought that I would write a book for him that might actually do him harm is too ghastly to contemplate. It is an insensitive and a monstrous implication. Moreover, I believe that I am a better judge than Mrs. Cameron of what stories are good or bad for children. We have had five children. And for the last fifteen years, almost without a break, I have told a bedtime story to them as they grew old enough to listen. That is 365 made-up stories a year, some 5,000 stories altogether. Our children are marvellous and gay and happy, and I like to think that all my storytelling has contributed a little bit to their happiness. The story they like best of all is *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*, and Mrs. Cameron will stop them reading it only over my dead body”.

**Sources:**


Photograph: www.amazon.com