

Racism in Roald Dahl's *The BFG*: A Social Criticism or White Supremacy Tendency?

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ABSTRACT

Children stories can be a powerful tool for a writer to present their views of the world around them, both positive and negative ones. This article attempts to examine the message beneath a children novel, *The BFG* by Roald Dahl by employing Barthes' five systems of codes. Focusing on the writerly codes, this descriptive qualitative research emphasizes on analyzing the smallest units of the stories, or the *lexias*. Each *lexia* is categorized into the three writerly codes to reveal the underlying message in the story. The findings show that despite *The BFG* being a children book, it consists of some serious social issues like racism. Another thing found in the research is that the issue can lead to a double meaning—whether Dahl intends to raise social awareness or that he wants to subtly say that he himself thinks of other races as inferior.

Keywords: Roald Dahl; Roland Barthes; five systems of codes; social criticism; racism.

INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have witnessed the rising interest in children's literature, both the production and the approaches to it in an attempt to "place children's literature within the context of those modern literary and cultural theories which post-date the various reader-response criticisms [...]" (Stephen, 2002, as cited in Valle, 2015, p. 5). Studies on children's literature using "adult literary terms" (Valle, 2015, p. 5) such as feminism, social construct, gender identity, postcolonialism and many more have been surging, especially since the late 1990s. These studies commonly focus on how the stories impact the children—whether or not the children will benefit from reading them, how the characters ring true enough to life that the children can identify themselves with them, and even to what features a children's book should have to appeal to the children.

Themes and plot, as well as what moral messages imparted to the children through the stories, are also a common focus in research on children literature (e.g. Whalen-Levitt, 1983; Muguro, 2018, among others). However, they are not the only aspects that can be analyzed in children stories. It is believed that every writer has not only different styles in writing but also different ways in creating a story: the same event, if told by two different people, will have differences—no matter how small. While a lot of children stories writers tend to focus on teaching children about moral lessons

and therefore will try to be as clear as possible in presenting the messages to the readers, some writers like to insert subtle messages in their stories—ones that are not easily understood without knowing the context and/or without critical reading on the piece.

Roald Dahl, one of the most famous British authors in the twentieth century, is a writer famous for his satirical style which he applies both to his works for adults and children alike (Petzold, 1992; Klugová, 2007; Jaber, 2016, among others). He is unafraid to touch sensitive topics in his stories and is known for his rather curious ways in presenting these issues. This is one of the reasons why Dahl's works, despite most of them being published in the 1950s, are still fascinating to analyze.

This paper attempts to analyze other messages than the obvious ones in line with the theme of the story that may appear in one of Dahl's most lovable children stories, *The BFG*, a story about an unlikely friendship between an orphan girl called Sophie and an outcast giant called the BFG—which stands for the "Big Friendly Giant". It is believed that there are underlying messages hidden underneath that are not only about friendship (Oulton, 2015) or that dream may come true (Morrissey, 2014). In order to find such messages, I employ Roland Barthes' five systems of codes, which is a theory in the structural semiotics branch of linguistics which is created to find the underlying message(s) within a narrative.

In his book *S/Z* (Barthes, 1974) Roland Barthes proposes that a narrative is differentiated into either a “work” or a “text” in which the former is seen as a mere commodity that is created for passive consumption and the latter is seen as a social space where the readers are put in a more active role of a creator of meaning (pp. 3-5). In other words, one is unable to create different interpretation or opinion when reading a “work” while they are allowed not only to question but also to evaluate and reinvent their own meanings—which may or may not be different from the original author’s intention—when reading a “text”.

A “text” itself can provide information beyond what is written to the readers, and the readers may be able to obtain this information without really having to read it in a linear way. In short, to derive a certain meaning from a text, one does not have to read from the beginning to the end of the text. Barthes (as cited in Barry, 2002), states that a text contains five semiotics elements which reflects the different dimensions of realism: hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, symbolic, and cultural codes (p. 151). These codes are considered “the basic underlying structures of all narratives” (Malik, Zaib & Bughio, 2014, p. 243). The codes are then divided into two different types, readerly and writerly.

The readerly codes are the ones in which the information from the text can only be derived from reading a text in order from the beginning to the end so that the narrative will make sense (University of Waterloo, n.d.). These codes are very important especially in traditional or classic works where readers learn about the narrative in a chronological order to understand about the actions and the situations. Out of the five codes, the first two mentioned above are considered readerly. The Hermeneutic code (HER), commonly also called the “enigma” code (Zaib & Mashori, 2014; Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 2005), refers to the elements that are puzzling and mysterious that are not thoroughly explained in the narrative so that it raises the readers’ curiosity and keeps the suspense going throughout the story. The readers continue on questioning what will happen next and thus making them actively involved in trying to make the story meaningful, especially so when some of the mysteries are not completely answered by the end of the narrative (Barry, 2002, p. 151; Malik et al., 2014, p. 243; Felluga, n.d.). The second readerly code, the proairetic code (ACT) is another structural code which indicates the sequence of action. This code gives clue on what action comes next in the narrative and keeps the suspense alive. Along with the hermeneutic code, this code involves active participations from the reader to ask questions about the narrative.

Different from the readerly codes, the writerly codes do not require a reader to read the narrative in sequence. On the contrary, the reader is encouraged to get their understanding from any part of the narrative and weave them into their own meaning. In other words, these codes do not abide to the chronological order of a narrative and are able to be understood pragmatically. The semantic code (SEM) gives additional or connotative meanings out of a description of a place, character, and object to understand the theme of the text (Barry, 2002, p. 151; Selden et al., 2005, p. 152; Zaib & Mashori, 2014, p. 173). Similar to this code, the symbolic (SYM) is related to finding the underlying theme of a text; however, it focuses more on the polarities or the oppositions found in the text. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between this code and the semantic code as Barthes does not put a clear distinction between the two (Felluga, n.d.). Zaib and Mashori (2014) mentions that the only probable distinction is that this code focuses solely on the elements that are contrasted to other elements present in the narrative, a statement which is in line with other researchers’ understanding of this code (Barry, 2002, p. 151; Malik et al, 2014, p. 243). The last of the codes, the cultural or the referential code (REF) contains information that is not explained in the text itself. It refers to the knowledge we learn outside the narrative itself such as physical, sociological, and literary knowledge (Felluga, n.d.), without which we may miss the underlying message of the text (Barthes, 1974, p. 20).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study is an analysis of a narrative text which is conducted following the steps suggested by Barthes in his book *S/Z* (1974). The analysis begins by dividing the novel into different lexias—units of meanings which range from one word to several paragraphs or even pages (Barry, 2002, p. 150)—after which each of the lexias is assigned to its corresponding codes. Some of the codes are overlapping with one another, and thus are analyzed as such.

Since the focus of this analysis is not to find the theme of the novel, the lexias containing the readerly codes (hermeneutic and proairetic) are set aside and are not analyzed in this paper. The same goes to the lexias containing the writerly codes but do not touch the subject of social criticism in them. Afterwards, the lexias with the underlying messages of various criticisms in the society at the time of the writing are categorized into different tables which indicate the issue discussed. Finally, they are put into a table that shows the number of occurrences in order that we can see what social issue is the most dominant one in this novel.

DISCUSSION

Despite being a novel intended for children (Flood, 2009; Valle, 2015), Roald Dahl manages to weave his narrative into serving another purpose: commenting on the society which he lives in. His commentary on the British in his novel *The BFG* can be said to be borderline criticizing with his vivid descriptions and strong dictions; however, it is written in such a way that laypeople—especially children, as the target audience—may not realize that they have been reading Dahl's personal take on social issues when reading the novel.

The novel consists of 328 lexias that talk about social issues, which after a further categorization can be put into three different main categories: racism, violence, and social gap in general. This finding complements other previous studies that report the presence of social issues in Dahl's *The BFG* (e.g. van Renen, 1986; Royer, 1998; Ciptaningrum & Chotib, 2013; among others) even though there are several differences found in this article in terms of what social issues are present and more dominating in the novel.

It is found that the majority of the lexias in this novel has the underlying message of racism (191 lexias out of 328, or 58.2%). It is an interesting finding, bearing in mind that the writer, Roald Dahl himself is often referred to as a racist and anti-Semitist (Carnevale, 2011; Kerridge, 2018). The novel is peppered with the issue of racism from very early in the story to the end, and the way that Dahl puts it makes it quite ambivalent whether he intends it to be a criticism against the society's view about superior race or he wants to show a certain race's superiority in the story. The first hint of racism can be seen early in the story in the lexias below.

Lexia 1

It wasn't a human. It couldn't be. It was four times as tall as the tallest human. It was so tall its head was higher than the upstairs windows of the houses. Sophie opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out. Her throat, like her whole body, was frozen with fright. (p. 4)

The lexia above appears early in the novel, in Chapter 2, and it reveals not only the appearance of the BFG itself but also the main character's (Sophie) reaction to it. This lexia contains two narrative codes: symbolic (SYM) and semantic (SEM).

The SYM code in Lexia 1 focuses on the difference between humans and the BFG character. It is clear from the description of the BFG being a lot taller than

average human beings that Dahl wants to create a mental perception in the readers' minds that the BFG is different. The analysis of SYM in this lexia does not provide anything relating to the issue of racism; nevertheless, the analysis of SEM, which shows how Sophie reacts to the BFG's appearance, hints at the issue. It focuses on how different the BFG is from average people. Her reaction upon seeing the BFG may be described as a typical reaction to stress and fear (Kennerly, 2009) as she was petrified—unable to either move or make a sound. One may argue that Sophie's reaction may be linked to the fact that children usually demonstrate a certain reaction to frightening things, yet there is nothing in this lexia that suggests the BFG as a frightening being; it merely points out that his height is unlike a normal human being.

What is interesting is that in the next part of the event, in Lexia 2, Sophie "decided that it *had* to be some kind of **PERSON**" (p. 6) in reference to the BFG. As it is through her perspective the readers see the story. It can be implied that the readers will not perceive the BFG as a person if the narrator, Sophie, does not decide so. From this and the continuation of Lexia 1 about her reaction, it can be drawn that what Sophie is doing is a type of subtle racism—the unconscious prejudice which can include a millisecond reaction such as "primitive fear and anxiety responses" (National Research Council [NRC], 2004) towards an outgroup, or people who are considered different from oneself. This type of racism is not based on the belief that one's race is better than the others but rather on the biased thoughts and stereotyping about those who are different from oneself (Salter, Adam, & Perez, 2018). This biased perception about the BFG being an outgroup that is different and, therefore, bad is highlighted even more in Lexia 3.

Lexia 3

In the moonlight, Sophie caught a glimpse of an enormous long pale wrinkly face with the most enormous ears. The nose was as sharp as a knife, and above the nose there were two bright flashing eyes, and the eyes were staring straight at Sophie. There was a fierce and devilish look about them. (p. 6)

In this lexia, the readers are provided with a more detailed physical description of the BFG, in which the choice of words leads the readers to believe that the BFG is a frightening, unpleasant creature. In describing the face, Dahl uses the adjectives "long pale wrinkly" with "the most enormous ears"; he also compares the nose to a knife and says that the eyes look "fierce and devilish". This description is in line with the way a lot of children stories, especially fairy tales, describe the

villains (Spanothymiou, Kyridis, Christodoulou1, & Kanatsouli, 2015). This means that Dahl wants the readers to view the BFG as a villain—an enemy. The perception that someone that is different from oneself physically is inherently not good is another type of subtle racism (Sue, 2010) which is embedded culturally based on historical practices in a society (Salter & Adams, 2013) and has been internalized (Plant & Devine, 1998) so much so that it is done subconsciously.

Lexia 10

The Giant let out a bellow of laughter. 'Just because I is a giant, you think I is a man-gobbling cannybull!' he shouted. (p.16)

Lexia 27

If she was going to be eaten, she'd rather get it over and done with right away than be kept hanging around any more. 'What sort of human beings do you eat?' she asked, trembling. (p. 19)

From the lexias above, it can be drawn that there is another prejudice in play. Both lexias happen in the same chapter. The first lexia belongs to the SEM code as it deals with the connotative meaning of what the BFG says about him being considered as a cannibal. Without giving a chance for the BFG to speak or say anything, Sophie immediately jumps into conclusion that the giant must want to eat her. In other words, she holds a certain belief or stereotype about all giants being cannibals. A stereotype is defined by According to *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies* to be “a vivid but simple representation that reduces persons to a set of exaggerated, usually negative, character traits” (Barker, 2004, p.188). It stresses highly on the differences—creating a ‘us’ versus ‘them’ situation in which the ‘them’ is considered an exclusion of something that is a normal order of things and is very harmful as the attribute assigned to the others may not base on facts. The narrator of the story, through the eyes of Sophie, deliberately assigns a stereotype on the BFG based only on what she thinks giants do without knowing the hard fact of it. This is a very harmful practice and is a kind of structural discrimination which disadvantages a person from an outgroup to advance socially due to social bias (Bordalo, Coffman, Gennaioli, & Shleifer, 2015).

The BFG’s insinuation that Sophie thinks he is a cannibal is affirmed by Sophie herself in Lexia 27. They are talking about what kind of “human beans” the giants like to eat, and thus Sophie assumes that if other giants eat human beings, then this one is too. The comparison made between the other giants and the BFG makes the lexia belongs to the code SYM. In

here, Sophie draws a stereotype that all giants must eat humans even though she does not know whether this individual before her is a human-eater or not. Diène (2003) suggests in his article that modern racism does not only cover prejudice in race or skin color but also deals with “cultural antagonism” (p. 13) where people that are different are considered the ‘other’ and is perceived as the enemy.

The analysis of the two lexias above shows that despite their seemingly putting Sophie as the ‘bad guy’ for holding a certain perception that may not be true against the BFG, the message that underlies the two lexias are still very similar to the other three lexias discussed previously (Lexias 1, 2, and 3): Dahl emphasizes on racial superiority. In this case, Sophie, as the human being who does not eat another human, sees herself as more socially cultured and more superior than the BFG, who is thought as barbaric and uncultured.

The prejudice and stereotyping continue in the lexias following the two examples above, and they extend to the humans living in different countries—this time not from Sophie’s perspective but through the BFG’s description. For example, Lexia 15 talks about how “Every human bean is diddly and different. Some is scumdiddlyumptious and some is uckyslush” (p. 16), which suggests that even the giants create a distinction between human beings although he is mainly talking about the taste of human meat.

Lexias 16 to 26 give detailed description on how each human tastes based on the countries they are from: the Greek are said to taste greasy; people from Panama taste like hats; the Welsh are fishy; people from Jersey have woolly taste—like cardigans; and those from Wellington taste like boots. In these lexias, Dahl does not only play with connotative meanings but also with cultural knowledge of the readers. The references to the real-world culture outside the text itself, or the REF code in Barthes’ theory rely on the readers’ knowledge and I believe it has at least two different purposes: to create humor and to establish stereotypes.

As the novel is intended for children, it is considered that Dahl’s main purpose is to create certain perceptions on children’s mind about different races rather than to create humor. Children’s perspective is still malleable; it is very easy to instill a lesson or a certain outlook and belief in a child’s mind as they learn to build perception about the world around them (Eccles, 1999; Brice, 2012). As Ostrom (2018) puts it, a child who is exposed to biased opinions may grow up believing in them without changing their perspective as adults.

These stereotypical differences, albeit seemingly funny to adults, may make children who have not understood the jokes yet to become prejudiced against other races and cultures. It may bring the feeling of race superiority to readers from countries described nicely (e.g. Lexia 14 about the Turks who are described as having “glamorous flavor” (p. 16)) or it may make them look down on other races that are portrayed negatively. An example is seen from Lexia 16, when the BFG describes the people from Greece as “all full of ucky slush” and that “No giant is eating Greeks, ever” (p. 16).

In the later chapters, it is found that some of the prejudice and stereotypes do not only come from the other group, i.e. humans having prejudiced against giants and vice versa, but also from the same group as can be seen from the lexia below.

Lexia 59

'And you is an insult to the giant peoples!' shouted the Bloodbottler. 'You is not fit to be a giant! You is a squinky little squiddler! You is a pibbling little pitsqueak! You is a ... cream puffnut!'

Lexia 59 shows how another giant, Bloodbottler, perceives the BFG as a disgrace of his own race because the BFG refuses to conform to their culture norm that is eating human beings. Although it can be waved off as a kind of Bloodbottler's personal grudge against the BFG, this type of behavior may also be seen as an act of racism; internalized racism. In this type of racism, a member of a certain race (in this case, Bloodbottler) assumes a racist attitude towards another member of the same race (the BFG) based on the stereotype they think belonging to their own group (Szymanski & Gupta, 2009). In other words, the BFG is seen an outgroup by his own race because his actions do not reflect the stereotypes of the giant race.

Bivens (2005) states that internalized racism is twice as harmful because it means that the racism has been so structuralized and embedded deeply in a culture that the people in the group itself sees it as something inherent, something that is also mentioned in Szymanski and Gupta (2009) in their article. Therefore, by portraying the BFG as a non-human-eating giant, Dahl has made this character a victim of double racism as the BFG experiences negative judgment both from the ones outside his group (i.e. Sophie and other human beings) and inside (i.e. other giants).

Lexia 73

He was right. Of course he was right and Sophie knew it. She was beginning to wonder whether humans were actually any better than giants. 'Even so,' she said,

defending her own race, 'I think it's rotten that those foul giants should go off every night to eat humans. Humans have never done them any harm.' (p.66)

In this lexia, which shows SYM code, Sophie and the BFG argue about their respective races—each believing that the other race is more savage and crueler than their own. The issue of race superiority, of having the opinion that one's race is inherently better (Feagin, 1999), is clearly seen here. The third sentence in the lexia explicitly mentions that Sophie understands that humans also have flaws, but she refuses to fully admit it by pointing a fault she finds in the other race. To this part of the story, although trying to also include the perspective of the giants, Dahl still leads the readers to view the giant's race to be inferior as they eat humans, which in Sophie's (and in extension, the readers') perspective is a crime.

As the story progresses and the readers are presented with how the BFG is different from other giants and therefore should not be considered as a part of their ingroup, Dahl seems to steer the story into a classic “white savior” narrative, the term used to refer to “a white person who acts to help non-white people, but in a context which can be perceived as self-serving” (Bakar, 2019). In the later part of the story, starting from around Chapter 17 (Lexia 103), the lexias are getting longer—some even cover one whole chapter—as they present the same units of meaning, which is the reason they are not presented here in this paper. These lexias talk about how Sophie helped the BFG to meet the Queen and convince her to assist them in killing all the other giants so that no human beings would be eaten ever again.

I believe that this narrative leans toward a white supremacy tendency, as in the end it is not the BFG who holds the power of deciding what is good for him—it is the people around him who do, and those people are the whites. In one small part of Lexia 105, the Queen speaks about sending the BFG to school because they “have some very good schools in this country” (p.140) when she is told that the BFG does not speak properly. As this story is set in England, and the Queen character may be presumed to be the Queen of England herself, it can be drawn that the “school” here refers to the western education. I believe that this, again, implies that white people's education is the right one even for those who are not white; thus, it hints on a white supremacy tendency. Jung (2015, as cited in Grzanka, Gonzales & Spanierman., 2019, p.487) states that despite the shifts of the meaning of the phrase, white supremacy always tends to have the common theme of promoting and believing that white people's perspective across all sectors of social life is superior to those of non-whites.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the SEM code dominates the lexias in this novel. It is not surprising, given that the semantic code relies heavily on connotation and therefore leaving the readers free to create their own meanings and understanding about the units. Dahl manages to raise the issue of racism in this novel by subtly hinting at it so that readers who are critical enough may catch on to this while at the same time making it light enough for casual readers to find it interesting without having to relate it to the situation that happens in the real world.

The novel, in my opinion, may create an ambivalent understanding about what Dahl tries to achieve in writing it. Of course, as a reader we can always gloss over the facts and enjoy this novel as a mere entertainment; however, this does not mean that readers cannot draw a deeper interpretation on the novel. Whether to see this novel as Dahl's effort to criticize the society or this is actually a proof that he is a racist himself and that the story is his way to lead his readers into believing that the white are superior, I think it depends heavily on how the readers want to interpret it. This is of course very in line with Barthes' notion that a text always has a plurality of meanings. Thus, if a reader has another interpretation outside the two possibilities mentioned above, it is also an open possibility.

Personally, I am quite undecided on what to make of this novel; that is whether I should think of it as a social criticism or a subtle hint of the writer's racism. However, my leaning is toward the second one given that in the end of the novel it is the humans (which are the British—white people) who become the hero in the story. The BFG himself, I believe, is merely an aid to achieve the white savior narrative in this novel. The use of his name as the title of the novel is, besides to attract the interest of the potential readers, only to show that he is a pivotal character to move the plot forward. Sadly, it is not his own narrative he is advancing but other people's, that is Sophie's.

This research is of course far from perfect as I only focus on the issue of racism that is dominantly found in the lexias. There are still some other social issues that are found in this novel that is not discussed in this paper which may add more insight to Dahl's intention. To further analyze the story it is suggested to employ another theory and approach in order that a more generalized and thorough understanding may be achieved.

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