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The monstrosity of not bearing children: an analysis of Roald Dahl's *The Witches*

The character of the witch is one so familiar to children and the general public, one does not often have to describe them. From the candy-giving trickster in “Hansel and Gretel” to the wicked witch who has a house dropped on her head in L. Frank Baum’s *Wizard of Oz*, they represent the evil through ugly faces, sometimes green skin, big noses and warts. However, upon closer inspection of the archetype of the witch, there is a less obvious evil and “ugliness” that surrounds them, one very much rooted in the expectations of a patriarchal society still under great religious influence: the hatred of children.

On exploring the concept of the monstrous-feminine, Anna Wing Bo Tso writes “assertive female characters (usually antagonists) are often evil queens, mean stepmothers, witches and other monstrous-feminine, who are punished and killed at the end of the story because they have trespassed into the men’s domain” (Tso 216). While the statement rings true, there is an element hidden in the words that is not always considered, more specifically the age of said characters.

Why is age of importance? There is a running stereotype in the entertainment arts community that women over forty suddenly start getting the roles of mothers and, when that is not possible, of witches. It is significant that this distinction is made as a woman’s age is often an indication of her fertility and so, to conform with the expectations of an audience raised on traditional family values, if a woman is not a mother, she is a monster. In Roald Dahl’s *The Witches*, the title characters are not simply monsters, they are monsters moved by the single goal of eliminating children from the face of the Earth, children whom they hate “with a red-hot sizzling hatred” (Dahl 1). They are incapable of creating life, they are barren and this fact puts them squarely in the category of evil monsters who must be removed if society is to thrive.

The witches' stance as the "most dangerous, living creatures on Earth," (Dahl 3) is closely associated with their position on children and, by association, family values. It can be argued that the murderous intent the characters present, in particular the Grand High Witch, could be read as the refusal to bear children or even the choice of interrupting a pregnancy. It is a "murder" of the natural order and one that must not be respected, but punished.

The symbolism becomes even clearer when we look at how these women are presented: initially beautiful, small, even meek, the perfect representation of the traditional feminine, the kind of woman who could and should become a nurturing mother or mother figure, much like the protagonists' grandmother. But as the masks come off, as the wigs get pulled from their heads and their shoes and gloves removed, their true grotesque nature is revealed, the external serving as a reflection of the internal. These women, once thought to be ready to fulfil their functions as obedient wives and mothers are now standing up together and shedding their skin to reveal their intent and agency.

They are no longer women, they have barged into territory that does not belong to them, one of choice and loud, raspy voices and the kind of charge over their own lives that is usually attributed to men. As Tso puts it "children's books also tend to represent evil female characters as macho-women, or, in other words, women who possess masculine qualities", (Tso 219). It is less about the nature of the choice, but about the fact that they could have any choice at all, a typically male option.

The implication that it is not a woman's place to choose to have children is clear on the hatred they bear toward them and the vengeance they want to execute upon their very existence. After all: " 'good' women are never those who trespass on the men's domain" (Tso 220). In Dahl's universe "if only... we could round them [the witches] all and put them in the meat grinder. Unhappily, there is no such way" (Dahl 5). It is not cruel to think of putting the

witches in the meat grinder because to the author's eye they are not human, they have signed their right to live away by not agreeing to what society needs them to do.

While the analysis of Tso's article is comprehensive on the subject of transgression of gender roles, it fails to emphasize this most important aspect of the hatred shown in *The Witches*. Unlike in fairy tales or other children's literature, these villain's hatred isn't directed at humanity as a whole but extremely targeted at the thing they cannot have, the thing that ultimately draws the line that separates them from the "normal" women living in everyday society. Their gathering, a reminder of the covens and sisterhood of the times of witch hunts in which women were persecuted for not conforming to the roles the Catholic church assigned them, is one of power and decision making.

While it becomes obvious that they are the villains of the story through their intentions not just of murder but the excessively cruel means to carry such murders - for example turning children into pheasants during hunting season or having their own teachers and parents kill them when they turn into mice - the novel also relies on the reader's disgust for these creatures through graphic descriptions of their bodies and transformations. Echoing the themes of temptation and sin present in religious teachings, they are described to draw people in with sweet appearances and actions, but soon undergo grotesque transformations that reveal their true nature and reinforce the fear of power and beauty in women. "They look like women. They talk like women. And they are able to act like women. But in actual fact, they are totally different animals" (Dahl, 23-24).

The criticism of women who do not bend to a nurturing nature does not end with the witches. Bruno Jenkins' mother, for all intents and purposes a conformed lady with a husband and a son, a woman who fulfilled her role in society, is still not free of the judgemental gaze of the author. Her refusal to continue to love and nurture her son after his transformation - as is the case with the protagonists' grandmother - puts her in a sort of

moral limbo: not cruel enough to be completely monstrous (she did have a child after all) but challenging enough to be disliked (she seems to not mind, or even hope, to be rid of Bruno.)

The fear and disgust invoked through the desire of ridding the world of children is one echoed by politicians and thinkers who often state that a woman choosing to terminate a pregnancy or not get pregnant at all has the ultimate goal of eliminating children and families from society, a tear on the fabric that has been built for centuries. It cannot be her choice because women do not *have* a choice. They have a pre determined, natural path to follow, one of reproduction and conformity that stems from stories like Adam and Eve's and marriage laws from as early as the eleventh century. A choice turns a woman into an agent of her own story, which challenges the delicate balance built by a patriarchal society. "Their feminine appearance and masculine behavior, their human-like, yet non-human identity, their disfigured, grotesque physical appearance, together with their evil desire and power to dehumanize and kill children, make them a life-threatening negation that must be radically excluded" (Tso 231).

Upon elimination of these dissident women it is assumed that society can resume its natural course, a course very much established by men. And one does not need to read between the lines to see that the criticism is targeted specifically at *women* who challenge the norm: "but the fact remains that all witches *are* women. There is no such thing as a male witch" (Dahl, 9). The author goes on to mention other evil creatures who are male, but makes sure to let the reader know that none of them are nearly as dangerous as a witch.

The ambiguity and namelessness of the witches serves as a reminder that they are not people, they are not *women*. They are something else, something so evil and dark it cannot even create life, something that could be reflected in the real world as a transformation a woman would undergo after deciding against having children or even discovering she is not able to. It is a criticism of an entire gender based on notions created when very little was

understood about the human body and before several discussions and progress were made on human rights. *The Witches* has a place on the shelf as a classic, but one with a dangerous outlook on the nature of femininity and the consequences of choices that challenge not only the patriarchy, but what is considered *natural* and the agency women should have upon their own lives.

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